South Haven
Tribune

$3

May 10, 2026

SH council sends narcotics millage to ballot

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council are placing a narcotics millage renewal to be put on the Aug. 4 ballot.

The proposed millage would not only be renewed but would be increased to .7 mills for five years on all taxable property in the city.

"The idea there is that, in Michigan, all your taxes eventually roll back and right now our current operating millage is rolled back to 9.3 percent," City Manager Kate Hosier said.

The narcotics millage was last approved in November of 2021. The millage had a term of five years and will expire on Dec. 31, 2026.

The city has used the funding to employ two officers to be assigned to the narcotics investigation teams and a portion to go to the K-9 unit costs.

Council member Mary Hosley said she was concerned about the increase of the millage.

"In 2021, when it was put on the ballot, the DDA (Downtown Development Authority) had agreed to not take their portion, which is 11.7 percent I believe, for three years to help with building up the budget of the narcotics fund," Hosley said. "We cannot require them to do that, they have to do that on their own, but with the DDA getting so much, I would hope that they would reconsider that."

Hosley added that there is no time to make any changes to the proposal if it is to be on the Aug. 4 ballot.

"I really had hoped that the resolution could be different so that we would not have to have the .0492 percent," Hosley said. "But because time is of the essence, we don't really have time to make modifications at this point, but that would be one way to ensure that the narcotics team is fully funded."

Council member Tom Capps said it will be up to the residents to decide if they want to pay the .7 mills.

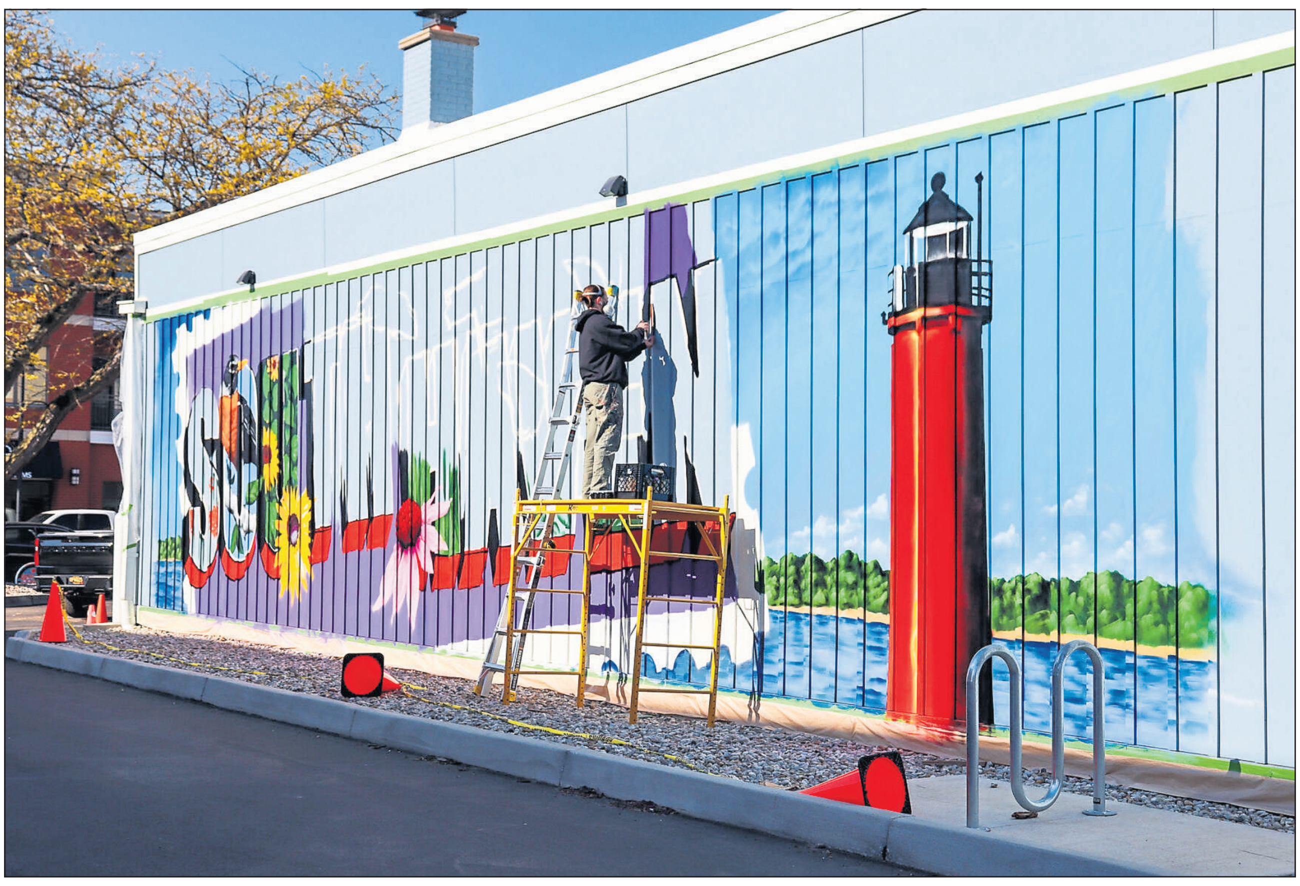
"First, it's just to be put on the ballot, so it will be up to the public to decide if they want to pay extra money or not – not the council," Capps said. "Second, it's kind of tough to ask the DDA, when I'm not sure we know what kind of money the DDA has. They have spoken and got a lot of money allotted for the new ice rink, so to assume they have the money to do it, I would say we would have to look at their budget a little better before we decide to take money from them."

Other items

City council approved the special event Lincoln Elementary School Block Party to be held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on June 2.

Construction of a permanent access driveway to Blue Star Highway for the Public

See **MILLAGE**, page A5



Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Michigan muralist Kevin Wolfrom paints a 60-foot-wide mural Consumers Credit Union's downtown South Haven office.

Consumers Credit Union commissions South Haven mural

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Consumers Credit Union recently commissioned Michigan muralist Kevin Wolfrom to create a 60-foot-wide mural at its downtown South Haven office.

According to a news release, the mural will feature a postcard-style interpretation of South Haven, paired with a ground-level rendering of the South Haven lighthouse, designed to invite interactive selfies and group photos from residents and visitors.

"South Haven has such a strong visual identity: the lake, the light, the sense of history mixed with summer energy," Wolfrom said in the release. "I love creating murals that have purpose and intention – work that brings forth a sense of connection the community can tap into."

The South Haven lighthouse, located at the mouth of the Black River and first lit in 1872, is one of Michigan's most photographed maritime landmarks and a longstanding symbol of the city's identity as a Lake Michigan destination.

"Once completed, the mural is expected to become a new visual landmark in downtown South Haven, complementing the city's walkable retail district and vibrant seasonal tourism scene," the release stated.

Consumers Credit Union selected Wolfrom for the project based on his track record of creating community-centered murals across Michigan, particularly in Grand Rapids and West Michigan.

"This mural represents our commitment to investing in the places where our

See **MURAL**, page A5

Fire hydrant flushing to take place in SH

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Area Water Sewer Authority will conduct annual fire hydrant and water main flushing throughout its service area from May 11 to June 15.

According to a news release, flushing activities will occur between 4 a.m. and 5 p.m. in the City of South Haven, Casco Township and South Haven Township.

"Annual hydrant flushing is an important part of maintaining the water distribution system," the release sated. "The process helps remove naturally occurring sediment and mineral deposits from water mains, ensures hydrants and valves operate properly and helps maintain water quality throughout the system."

Flushing schedules and locations will vary each day.

Water remains safe for drinking and normal use during flushing operations. However, customers may temporarily experience cloudy or discolored water and brief reductions in water pressure.

If discoloration occurs, customers should run a cold water faucet until the water becomes clear. Avoid using hot water until water has cleared; this will prevent sediment from entering the hot water tank.

Residents are encouraged to avoid doing laundry while flushing is occurring in their area, as discolored water may stain clothing.

Customers experiencing any of the following conditions are encouraged to contact the Department of Public Works:

■ Water remains discolored after running cold water.

■ Reduced water pressure that does not return to normal.

■ Ongoing low water flow after flushing operations are completed.

See **HYDRANTS**, page A5

Ride the bus with AAA for Older Michiganians Day

By TRIBUNE STAFF

Older adults and their advocates around Southwest Michigan are invited to attend Older Michiganians Day on Wednesday, May 13, in Lansing with Region IV Area Agency on Aging.

According to a news release, AAA is providing free bus transportation so community members may participate in this annual advocacy day. Pick-up and drop-off spots will be available in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties:

■ 6:15 a.m.: Cass County Council on Aging, 227 S. Front St., Dowagiac.

■ 7 a.m.: Campus for Creative Aging, 2920 Lakeview Ave., St. Joseph.

■ 7:45 a.m.: Senior Services of Van Buren County, 8337 M-140, South Haven.

Space is limited, and AAA is committed to ensuring strong representation from all voting districts in the tri-county area.

"Older Michiganians Day brings older adults, caregivers and community members together to engage with state leaders on issues impacting aging across Michigan," AAA CEO Christine Vanlandingham said in the release. "This year's advocacy platform focuses on four core issues that directly affect people's ability to age well."

The issues are:

■ Rebalancing Medicaid long-term care funding toward home and community-based services.

■ Increasing access to non-Medicaid in-home services, such as meals and personal care.

■ Modernizing and expanding access to the MI Choice Waiver program.

■ Supporting unpaid family and informal caregivers, whose contributions are essential but often unseen.

"These issues are not abstract," Vanlandingham said. "They show up when someone cannot get a home-delivered meal, when a caregiver

See **RIDE**, page A5

ELECTIONS

VB County measures approved across the ballot

By TRIBUNE STAFF

A handful of bond renewals and a council member race were decided during Tuesday's special election in Van Buren County.

From a parks proposal to a school bond renewal, voters approved all ballot measures.

Here's a rundown of how the ballots added up during Tuesday's election by municipality and school district in Van Buren County.

Bangor

The lone council race in Van Buren County included Patricia Martinez-Serratos and William Murphy Jr., who were vying for two spots on the Bangor City Council.

Martinez-Serratos received 71 votes, while Murphy had 59 votes. Seven votes were tallied as write-ins.

Gobles schools

Voters approved the Gobles school district bond renewal by a 509-347 vote margin.

This proposal will allow the school district to continue to levy 18 mills on all property.

The 10-year bond was renewed through 2036, which will be used for operating purposes. The estimate of the revenue the school district will collect in 2027 is about $1,276,640.

Paw Paw

Voters approved a Paw Paw parks proposal by a 251-151 vote margin.

The village was currently levying 1.4792 mills, which will now be renewed and levied through 2030. As part of the ballot measure, Paw Paw can levy an additional 0.0208 mills to restore previous millage reductions under the Headlee Amendment.

The revenue received by Paw Paw will be used to make improvements to and fund the operational and maintenance costs of the village's parks.

It's estimated a levy of 1.5 mills would provide revenue of $157,615 in the first year.

The Tribune: Celebrating Our 127th Year

Support the Local Businesses
Who Help Support
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Photo provided / Tom Renner

The Rotary Club of South Haven recently celebrated its 70th anniversary year of service to the community.

The Rotary Club of South Haven marks its 70th year

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Rotary Club of South Haven recently marked its 70th year of service to the community with an anniversary celebration.

According to a news release, the club was chartered in February, 1956 with an initial membership of 25 men. Today the club's roll totals 65 men and women.

"The City of South Haven, through a resolution, commended the club for exemplifying the core values of Rotary International by fostering fellowship, promoting integrity and advancing goodwill and peace throughout the community and beyond," the release stated.

To recognize this milestone, the club honored five members who have collectively served 196 years including: President-Elect Bob Metzen and President Amy Nichols, Robert Copping, members since 1994; Tom Ruesink (1995), Larry Wittkop (1974), Ted Weber (1987) who received the club's first Lifetime Achievement Award; and Honoree Tom Fleming (1994).

"The club also marked its commitment to Rotary International's work through its Paul Harris Fellowship program," the release stated.

Sixteen members are new Paul Harris Fellows and another 22 advanced their support of the program. Since its founding the South Haven club has had 105 members designated Paul Harris Fellows with contributions to Rotary International totaling more than one-half a million dollars.

Five members were also recognized for their support of Rotary International's Polio Plus program including: Jordan Alsup, Brook Blanchard, Robert Boerma, Robin McGonnis and the late Jeff Wilhelm.

Photo provided

Bangor Community Fire Department firefighters work to extinguish hot spots Sunday night at a structure fire in the 200 block of Lake Street in Bangor.

No one injured in Bangor house fire

Fire could have started at the back porch, cause unknown

By TRIBUNE STAFF

BANGOR — Several fire departments were called to extinguish a house fire Sunday night in Bangor, which officials have deemed a total loss.

Bangor Community Fire Department firefighters were dispatched at 10:20 p.m. Sunday to a structure fire in the 200 block of Lake Street.

Upon arrival, Bangor Fire Chief Derek Babcock said the rear of the residence was fully engulfed in flames. However, flames had spread to the interior of the home.

Babcock said the fire appears to have started on the back porch. The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

The residents safely evacuated from the residence by the time first responders arrived, and no injuries were reported.

Mutual aid assistance was requested from South Haven Area Emergency Services and Columbia Township Fire Department.

Van Buren Emergency Medical Services and Indiana Michigan Power also responded Sunday night.

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Photo provided / Tom Renner

South Haven Area Emergency Services recognized their members' service and accomplishments during the annual banquet celebrating 30 years.

SHAES celebrates 30 years of service

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Area Emergency Services (SHAES) recently marked 30 years of service to the community during its annual banquet.

According to a news release, the South Haven Area Emergency Services Authority, consisting of the city of South Haven and townships of Casco, Geneva and South Haven, was founded in 1996.

"SHAES has blossomed into an organization that has surpassed anyone's expectations," Executive Director Brandon Hinz said in the release. "Fire-based Advanced Life Support transport such as we provide is an oddity in Michigan, an oddity in the nation. It's an oddity because it's hard. It's difficult to manage, it's difficult to operate. It takes a village to provide this type of service."

SHAES has a combination of career and paid-on-call staff.

"Most fire departments that provide transport EMS are much larger than SHAES," Hinz said in the release.

In Michigan, out of 1,001 fire departments only 23 provide advanced life support transport.

The department operates from three stations with a staff that consists of 22 career and 29 paid-on-call members. The recently created cadet program has five members.

In 2025, the department responded to 2,920 alarms, 2,021 medical and 899 fire calls.

"A highlight of the banquet was the recognition of members for service and accomplishments," the release stated.

Firefighter/paramedic Cody Sedlak, a member of the department for 10 years, was awarded Firefighter of the Year. He served as a paid-on-call member for four years before joining the career ranks. The reward is determined by members of the department.

"Cody told me once that it was always his dream to become a SHAES firefighter/paramedic," Hinz said in the release. "His ownership of this organization is almost extreme. He is our 'go to' person when a task needs to be completed."

The SHAES Leadership Award was presented to firefighter/paramedic Paul Pant.

"Thanks to Paul we're focusing on breaking a stigma surrounding mental health among public servants," Hinz said in the release. "In cooperation with the South Haven Police Department, a support program has been created to address the mental health needs of our members."

Pant has been in the forefront of creating an awareness within the department of the need to serve members' mental health needs.

"An average person experiences three to four traumatic events in their lifetime," Hinz said in the release. "Our staff experiences an average of two per month. This can take a toll over the course of a career."

As relatively new member of the career staff, Pant has also taken the lead in securing outside financial support for the department.

A formal swearing-in ceremony welcomed nine new members including: Luke Thompson FF, Sam Rose FF, Ayden Quinn FF, Josh Klein FF/EMT-B, Corey Heuer FF/EMT-B, Jacon Infante FF/EMT-B, Lily McCorry FF/EMT-B, Brock Lovell FF/EMT-B and Jacob Mulder FF/EMT-B.

Years of service pins were presented to several members including Allan Overhiser (40 years), Tom Renner (35 years), Ross Stein and Brad Filbrandt (30 years) and Cody Sedlak (10 years).

Three members received promotions during the past year including Captain Brian Montgomery, Lieutenants Phillip Quinn and Rex Haner.

The banquet also featured a formal swearing-in ceremony of the cadets including: Scott Ritchie, Alyssa Ockerman, Nick Rainey, Brenden Cramer and Payton Haner.

Astronomer to discuss light pollution issues in South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Dr. Anne Blackwell, an astronomer at the University of Michigan, will discuss the issue of worsening light pollution and efforts to combat it at the South Haven Speakers Series program on May 14.

According to a news release, the presentation will take place at 7 p.m. at the Lake Michigan College South Haven campus.

"Light pollution, or the excessive use of artificial lighting at night, is a problem because it disrupts peoples' sleep, animal migrations and the grand view of the twinkling stars above," the release stated. "Research shows light pollution is costly, disturbing wildlife, harming human health and blocking our view of the universe."

A study in Science magazine showed that the number of visible stars is decreasing by 7 percent to 10 percent a year.

"My worry is how disconnected we are becoming from nature and our ancestral knowledge," Blackwell said in the release.

A child born where 250 stars are visible today might only see about 100 by the time he or she is 18.

Blackwell is a co-coordinator and longtime member of Michigan Dark Skies, a group of astronomers, bird watchers and environmentalists advocating for more natural, less-intrusive lighting and for dark sky parks. Blackwell has helped to develop and present educational programs for the public, ranging from school students to senior citizens.

"Overbright lights are depriving us of the stellar spectacle that has inspired humanity for ages," Speakers Series Board Member Michael McCarthy said in the release. "During the day, South Haven offers wonderful views of the lake and sunset–is it possible we could provide an after-dark experience of a breathtaking, brilliant sky?"

In a dark-sky preserve movement, communities in Michigan and nationally are working to limit the amount of light that homes and businesses can disperse and requiring special low-wattage exterior lamps and sconces that direct light downward.

The event begins with refreshments at 6:30 p.m., followed by the presentation at 7 p.m.

The South Haven Speakers Series is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Three-quarters of the Series' budget is funded through donors.

For more information, go to southhavenspeakersseries.org.

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Photo provided

Folk duo Annie and Rod Capps will perform in South Haven as part of First Congregational UCC's Spring Concert Series.

Folk duo Annie and Rod Capps to perform in South Haven

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Folk duo Annie and Rod Capps will present a concert of joyful songwriting and storytelling as part of First Congregational UCC's Spring Concert Series.

According to a news release, the concert will take place at 3 p.m. on May 17 and include covers of Woody Guthrie, Joni Mitchell and John Prine.

Annie and Rod's sound meets at the intersection of Americana and Folk, citing rock, jazz and bluegrass influences.

"They sing songs about broken things and poignant little ponderings delivered with a rootsy vibe, a touch of twang and a soulful groove," the release stated. "Their musical journey began in 1982, culminating into a symbiotic sound that reflects their deep and intuitive understanding of each other."

From their home near Ann Arbor, Mich., Annie and Rod bring their music to folk festivals and listening rooms around the Midwest and tour from California to Maine.

"It is our fervent desire to always give our whole heart and soul along with 110 percent of our energy to anyone who chooses to listen to our songs," the release stated. "We sincerely want everyone who has made the choice to attend one of our shows to leave feeling satisfied, maybe with a newly provoked thought or lingering chuckle and always truly glad they came."

Tickets for the concert are $20 at the door and free for children 12 years old and under.

For more information, call Diane and Lisa at 269-637-3804 (opt. 5).

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SH introduces new home, energy programs

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The City of South Haven recently announced the rollout of two new programs available to income qualified residents.

According to a news release the two programs are the City's Community Development Block Grant Home Rehabilitations Program and Franklin Energy's, Energy Waste Reduction Program.

An informational session detailing the specifics of these programs, as well as how to apply, will be held at 5:30 p.m. on May 20. The meeting will be held in Council Chambers at City Hall, located at 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven.

"In 2025 the City of South Haven was awarded $400,000 in CDBG funding for critical home rehabilitation," the release stated. "This program is restricted to income qualified households in the City of South Haven and is intended to help homeowners make critical repairs to their home for health, safety and welfare."

This program will be managed through city staff and third-party administrator, Market One.

The City's Energy Waste Reduction (Energy Smart) Program launched in February. Franklin Energy is the City's third-party partner running the program.

Rebates are now available for income-qualified residential customers.

Customers are encouraged to contact Franklin Energy and attend our meeting to learn more about energy savings and available rebates.

For more information, go to www.mienergysmart.com.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9 to 10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

South Haven Memorial Library: Bridge Card Game from 1 to 4 p.m. every Tuesday and Wednesday. Open to the public. Beginners are welcome.

Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for students grades 6 through 12 every Monday from 3 to 5 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: May 1 through 31 "Deep In the Branches" (by 2026 Bailey Fall Conference Keynote Speaker Danae Wolfe) StoryWalk

South Haven Farmers Market: Open from 8 a.m. to 2pm on Saturdays, from May to October; and on Wednesdays from June through August.

May

11 – South Haven Garden Club: Meeting beginning at 12:30 p.m. with guest speaker Sandy Haga. Activity featured will be wearable trash art.

12 – South Haven Indivisible: Carsie Blanton to kick of her US tour with a benefit concert for Todos Bienvenidos from 7:30 to 9 p.m. at the Saugatuck Center for the Arts.

12 – Rotary Club: Morning meeting with a presentation by Kerry Hagy of the South Haven Center for the Arts.

13 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

14 – South Haven Speaker Series: Astronomer Annie Blackwell to present "How Bright Lights Endanger Starry Nights" as she describes the growing challenge of light pollution and efforts to reduce it.

15 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play event for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

16 – Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: Starting at 11 a.m. "Forest Relaxation" with Jodi Henley. Find Your Path LLC. Experience the benefits of forest bathing while taking time to relax, unwind, and find a few moments of peace. Join us for an hour or so of slow walking and gentle, guided meditative activities to learn about how the forest can help us heal and reduce stress.

17 – Scott Club: Concert Series featuring Jazz Pianist Redwood at 3 p.m.

17 – First Congregational UCC: Spring Concert Series featuring Annie and Rod Capps at 3 p.m.

19 – Scott Club: Michigan's Lady Senator Eva McCall Hamilton at 1 p.m. in person at Scott Club and on Zoom.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

21 – South Haven Memorial Library: Intro to Zine making from 4 to 5:30 p.m. Free program for adults and teens ages 14 and up.

23 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club at 11 a.m.

23 – Michigan Flywheelers Museum: Petal and Power Tools fundraiser from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

26 – Rotary Club: Morning meeting. Presentation will be South Haven High School Principal Amy Cockburn.

27 – South Haven Memorial Library: Friends of the South Haven library meeting from 2 to 3 p.m.

28 – Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: Starting at 6 p.m. "Taking Time to be Present" with Jodi Henley | Find Your Path LLC. Feeling overwhelmed with your responsibilities? Losing sense of who you are? Looking for ways to reground and recenter? Join us for an hour or so of slow walking and gentle, guided meditative activities to help you feel present and connected to the world and your place in it.

29 – South Haven Memorial Library: Parent Cafe from 11 a.m. to noon.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum to host forest bathing events

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — The Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum is hosting a unique experience for people to rest and renew through two upcoming forest bathing events.

According to a news release, the sessions will be hosted on May 16 and 28 by Jodi Heaney, founder of Find Your Path LLC, and are designed to help participants unplug from daily stress and reconnect with the natural world.

"Forest bathing, inspired by the Japanese practice of shinrin-yoku, encourages individuals to slow down and mindfully engage their senses in a natural setting," the release stated.

During each session, participants will be guided through a series of reflective and sensory-based activities that promote relaxation, clarity and overall well-being.

"Rather than hiking or exercising, participants are invited to slow down, engage their senses and connect more deeply with the natural world," Heaney said in the release. "Research has shown that time spent in nature can help reduce stress, improve mood and support overall health.

Each forest bathing session will take place on the museum grounds and is open to all participants regardless of experience level. Comfortable walking shoes, weather appropriate clothing and water are recommended.

"Through gentle invitations and quiet observation, forest bathing offers a restorative pause from daily life – helping individuals, teams and communities reconnect with both nature and themselves," Heaney said in the release.

The first session is entitled "Forest Relaxation Experience" which will take place at 11 a.m. on May 16. The second session, "Taking Time to be Present," will begin at 6 p.m. on May 28.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum and Gardens is located at 903 S. Bailey Ave, South Haven, MI.

The event cost $20 per museum member and $25 per non-museum member. Space is limited and advance registration is required.

For more information and to register for the event, go to libertyhydebailey.org/forest-relaxation or call the museum at 269-637-3251.

The South Haven Tribune makes every effort to ensure accuracy in its stories. If you believe there is an error, please contact the editor of the page on which it occurred. If you are unsure who to contact, call 269-637-1104 to be directed to the appropriate editor.

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0900 LEGALS

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN
NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING
"THE TRUTH IN BUDGETING ACT"

The City Council of the City of South Haven, Van Buren and Allegan Counties, Michigan will hold a public hearing on the proposed Fiscal Year 2026-27 Budget. The hearing will be held on Monday, May 18, 2026 at 7:00 p.m. at the South Haven City Hall, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, Michigan.

A copy of the proposed budget is on file in the Office of the City Clerk from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday or on the city's website at southhavenmi.gov.

The property tax millage rate proposed to be levied to support the proposed budget will be a subject of this hearing.

This notice is published by:
City of South Haven
539 Phoenix Street
South Haven, MI 49090
(269) 637-0700

White
Space
Sells

MURAL

From page A1

members live, work and gather," Consumers Credit Union President and CEO Scott Sylvester said in the release. "Public art has a unique ability to spark pride and encourage connection. Partnering with a Michigan-based artist to celebrate South Haven felt like a natural fit."

A graduate of Kendall College of Art and Design, Wolfrom is known for vibrant color palettes, bold linework and themes that blend local storytelling with contemporary style.

"As a local credit union, this mural is just another way we're investing in downtown – creating an attraction that draws visitors in and gives them a reason to explore our local shops, restaurants and attractions," Consumers South Haven Offices Manager Ken Overholser said in the release. "It's really fitting that the mural will be painted during South Haven Business Week."

MILLAGE

From page A1

Works facility located at 1199 8th Ave. was approved during Monday's meeting.

The driveway would improve public access and visibility, reduce conflicts with industrial traffic on 8th Avenue, reduce two-way crossings and improve efficiency and operation for the department.

City council approved an amendment to the zoning ordinance's language that prevents the redevelopment of a nonconforming lot with a nonconforming structure.

City council approved an ordinance to rezone the property at 241 Oak St. from the R-1B single-family residential district to the RM-1 multiple-family residential district.

The 2.67-acre property is the site of the Victoria Resort, which has been open since the 1920s.

City council voted to amend the zoning ordinance to allow for projecting or hanging signs to be placed on buildings that also have an awning in the Central Business District.

City council agreed to an amendment on the parking fee violations in the code of ordinances.

"Some parking violations were updated to be more in line with what people are already seeing around," Hosier said. "So, this is just changing our ordinance to allow for higher fees if people do not pay to park or have run out of time or received a violation."

Fines for parking violations will be increased to $45. If not paid within seven days, the fine is increased to $75 and increased to $100 if not paid within 60 days.

City council set a public hearing for the 2026-27 fiscal year budget to be held at 7 p.m. May 18 during the regular city council meeting.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

RIDE

From page A1

struggles to balance work and care, or when institutional care becomes the default because community options are unavailable or underfunded."

During the event, leaders from across the state will speak about each of the topics. After the presentation, a free lunch will be provided while attendees have an opportunity to meet with their elected officials.

The bus will then return to Southwest Michigan arriving to South Haven at about 3 p.m., St. Joseph at 3:35 p.m., and Dowagiac at 4:15 p.m.

For those who are unable to make the trip to Lansing, a Livestream Watch Party will be held at the Campus for Creative Aging from 10 a.m. to noon. People can also stream the event from anywhere.

AAA is collecting letters of support to take to Lansing to hand directly to elected officials. Download the letter online or stop by Area Agency on Aging. Participants can return it in person or by mail to 2900 Lakeview Ave., St. Joseph, MI 49085.

To sign a letter, register for the bus trip, and to find the livestream link, visit https://areaagencyonaging.org/advocacy.

HYDRANTS

From page A1

Customers who experience any of the conditions can contact the public works department between 7 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. at 269-637-0737.

Residents with specific concerns or would like advance notice when flushing is planned in their area can contact Water/Sewer Superintendent Dustin Guminski at 269-637-0732.

"SHAWSA appreciates the public's patience and cooperation as this important maintenance work is completed," the release stated.

Al-Van Humane Society
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73303 8th Ave. PO Box 421 South Haven, MI 49090
phone 269.637.5062 fax 269.639.2242
Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

Meet our Pet of the Week, Riley!

Riley is an 8-month-old sweetheart with a playful spirit and a face that always looks a little surprised, thanks to his big, adorable eyes. It just adds to his charm. This fun-loving boy enjoys playtime, chasing toys, and staying busy, but he's just as happy to slow down for some affection. If you're looking for a fun, loving cat with a little extra personality, Riley is ready to meet you.

South Haven Pet Mayor Fundraiser

Nominations have started for the inaugural Pet Mayor of South Haven fundraiser! If you think your pet has what it takes to run the town, you can enter them with a $20 donation. As part of the nomination, you'll submit a photo and come up with a fun campaign slogan to help them stand out. Nominations will be open through May 11th, after which voting will begin, allowing the community to support their favorite candidates through donations.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Non-clumping clay cat litter

Health in Harmony.

125 years ago, Bronson began with a promise. What started as one hospital has grown into a symphony of care - each milestone adding a new note, each team strengthening the harmony. Across southwest Michigan, our hospitals, providers and teams move in step, guided by one mission: the health of our communities.

This anniversary is more than a celebration; it's a reaffirmation. Through innovation, investment and an unwavering commitment to safety, we continue to strengthen every hospital and community we serve because world-class care should always be in harmony, and never far from home.

Bronson | Health in Harmony | 125 Years Strong

bronsonhealth.com/125

BRONSON

Scott Club
1883
Foundry Hall

Scott Club Concert Series
REDWOOD
Sunday, May 17 at 3:00 pm
Free & Open to all

Enjoy an hour-long program of jazz selections & original compositions by this multi-talented musician & composer.

In person at Scott Club:
RSVP by May 15 (required) to: info@scottclub.org
Online at: https://www.twitch.tv/foundryhall

Concert is a collaboration between Scott Club & Foundry Hall. Reception will follow concert. Funded in part by **Holtec-Palisades, Low Family Foundation,** & **Rotary Club of South Haven** in memory of Carole Hodgman.

South Haven Scott Club
652 Phoenix Street
scottclub.org foundryhall.org

SOUTH HAVEN SPEAKER SERIES 2026
Issues, Innovations & Ideas Shaping Our Lives

THURSDAY, MAY 14TH, 7:00 PM

How Bright Lights Endanger Starry Nights

An astronomer tells us how to preserve the night sky and protect us, our nocturnal wildlife, and our precious ecosystem.
Dr. Blackwell has helped develop and present educational programs for the public, ranging from school students to senior citizens.

DR ANNE BLACKWELL
ASTRONOMER U OF M

Reception 6:30 PM
Presentation 7:00 PM
Admission $10.00 Students No Charge

Lake Michigan college - South Haven Campus
Contributions-Speakers Series of South Haven, PO Box 572 South Haven, Michigan 49090

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- ☐ Damaged
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- ☐ Dental Gold
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- ☐ Class Rings & Fraternal Pins

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- ☐ Old Paper Money
- ☐ Coin Collections

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- ☐ Any Condition

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No Need to Polish. No Silver Plate.
- ☐ Flatware & Serving Pieces
- ☐ Jewelry (Turquoise, Southwestern, etc.)
- ☐ Candlesticks & Candelabras

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- ☐ Military Memorabilia (Uniforms, Daggers, Swords, etc.)
- ☐ Pre-1950 Advertising & Toys
- ☐ Old Photos & Autographs (Tintypes, etc.)

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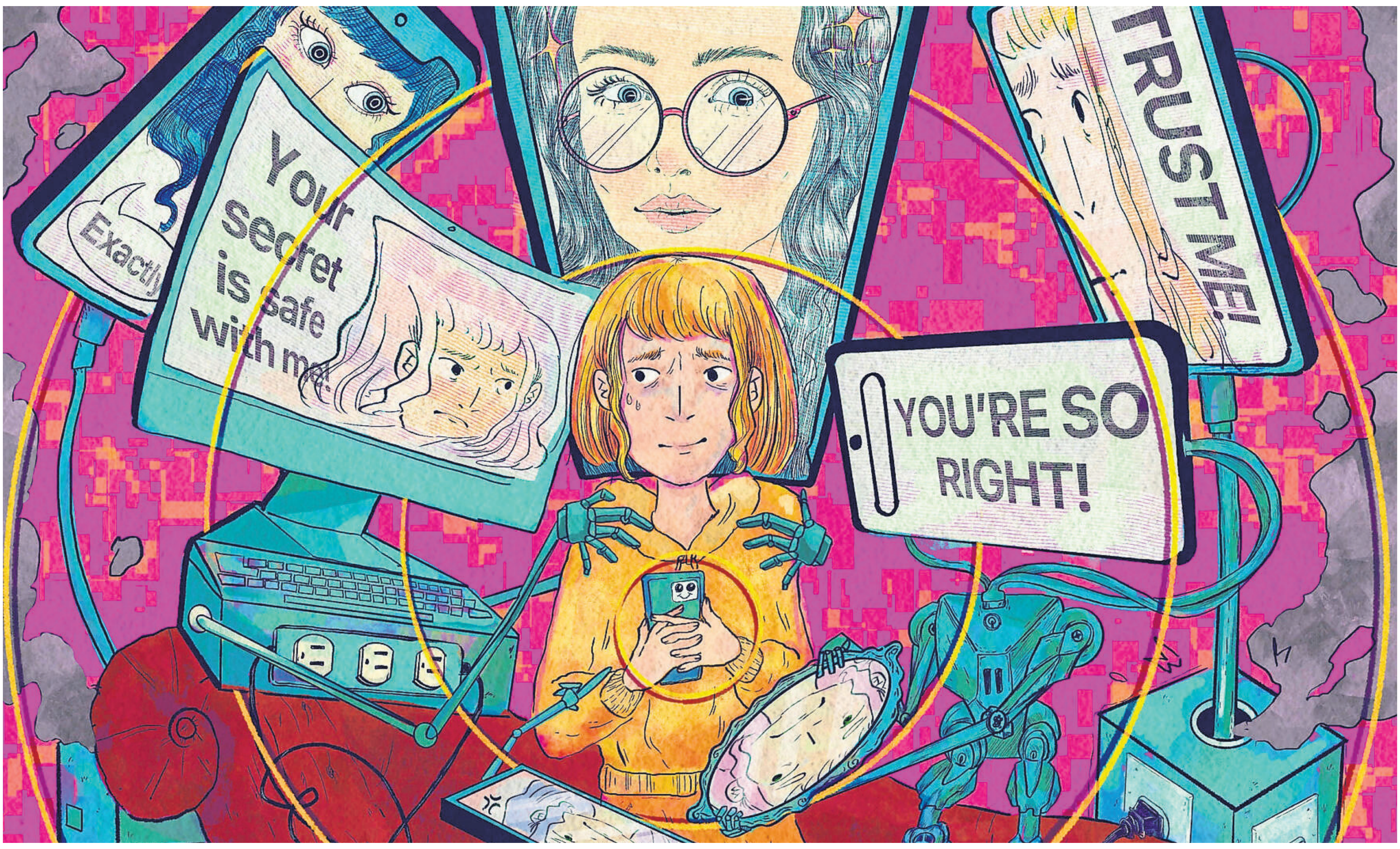
FOCUS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Oona Zenda / KFF Health News / TNS

Demand for mental health care has grown. Self-reported poor mental health days rose by 25 percent since the 1990s, found one study analyzing survey data. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates in 2022 matched a 2018 high that hadn't been seen in nearly 80 years.

Your new therapist

Chatty, leaky, and hardly human

By DARIUS TAHIR and OONA ZENDA
KFF Health News (TNS)

Vince Lahey of Carefree, Arizona, embraces chatbots. From Big Tech products to "shady" ones, they offer "someone that I could share more secrets with than my therapist."

He especially likes the apps for feedback and support, even though sometimes they berate him or lead him to fight with his ex-wife. "I feel more inclined to share more," Lahey said. "I don't care about their perception of me."

There are a lot of people like Lahey.

Demand for mental health care has grown. Self-reported poor mental health days rose by 25 percent since the 1990s, found one study analyzing survey data. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates in 2022 matched a 2018 high that hadn't been seen in nearly 80 years.

There are many patients who find a nonhuman therapist, powered by artificial intelligence, highly appealing – more appealing than a human with a reclining couch and stern manner. Social media is replete with videos begging for a therapist who's "not on the clock," who's less judgmental, or who's just less expensive.

Most people who need care don't get it, said Tom Insel, former head of the National Institute of Mental Health, citing his former agency's research. Of those who do, 40 percent receive "minimally acceptable care."

"There's a massive need for high-quality therapy," he said. "We're in a world in which the status quo is really crappy, to use a scientific term."

Insel said engineers from OpenAI told him last fall that about 5 percent to 10 percent of the company's then-roughly 800 million-strong user base rely on ChatGPT for mental health support.

Polling suggests these AI chatbots may be even more popular among young adults. A KFF poll found about 3 in 10 respondents ages 18 to 29 turned to AI chatbots for mental or emotional health advice in the past year. Uninsured adults were about twice as likely as insured adults to report using AI tools. And nearly 60 percent of adult respondents who used a chatbot for mental health didn't follow up with a flesh-and-blood professional.

The app will put you on the couch

A burgeoning industry of apps offers AI therapists with human-like, often unrealistically attractive avatars serving as a sounding board for those experiencing anxiety, depression, and other conditions.

KFF Health News identified some 45 AI therapy apps in Apple's App Store in March. While many charge steep prices for their services – one listed an annual plan for $690 – they're still generally cheaper than talk therapy, which can cost hundreds of dollars an hour without insurance coverage.

On the App Store, "therapy" is often used as a marketing term, with small print noting the apps cannot diagnose or treat disease. One app, branded as OhSofia! AI Therapy Chat, had downloads in the six figures, said OhSofia! founder Anton Ilin in December.

"People are looking for therapy," Ilin said. On one hand, the product's name promises "therapy chat"; on the other, it warns in its privacy policy that it "does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, treatment, or crisis intervention and is not a substitute for professional healthcare services." Executives don't think that's confusing, since there are disclaimers in the app.

The apps promise big results without backup. One promises its users "immediate help during panic attacks." Another claims it was "proven effective by researchers" and that it offers 2.3 times faster relief for anxiety and stress. (It doesn't say what it's faster than.)

There are few legislative or regulatory guardrails around how developers refer to their products – or even whether the products are safe or effective, said Vaile Wright, senior director of the office of health care innovation at the American Psychological Association. Even federal patient privacy protections don't apply, she said.

"Therapy is not a legally protected term," Wright said. "So, basically, anybody can say that they give therapy."

Many of the apps "overrepresent themselves," said John Torous, a psychiatrist and clinical informaticist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. "Deceiving people that they have received treatment when they really have not has many negative consequences," including delaying actual care, he said.

States such as Nevada, Illinois, and California are trying to sort out the regulatory disarray, enacting laws forbidding apps from describing their chatbots as AI therapists.

"It's a profession. People go to school. They get licensed to do it," said Jovan Jackson, a Nevada legislator, who co-authored an enacted bill banning apps from referring to themselves as mental health professionals.

Underlying the hype, outside researchers and company representatives themselves have told the FDA and Congress that there's little evidence supporting the efficacy of these products. What studies there are give-contradictory answers – and some research suggests companion-focused chatbots are "consistently poor" at managing crises.

"When it comes to chatbots, we don't have any good evidence it works," said Charlotte Blease, a professor at Sweden's Uppsala University who specializes in trial design for digital health products.

The lack of "good quality" clinical trials stems from the FDA's failure to provide recommendations about how to test the products, she said. "FDA is offering no rigorous advice on what the standards should be."

Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson Emily Hilliard said, in response, that "patient safety is the FDA's highest priority" and that AI-based products are subject to agency regulations requiring the demonstration of "reasonable assurance of safety and effectiveness before they can be marketed in the U.S."

The silver-tongued apps

Preston Roche, a psychiatry resident who's active on social media, gets lots of questions about whether AI is a good therapist. After trying ChatGPT himself, he said he was "impressed" initially that it was able to use cognitive behavioral therapy techniques to help him put negative thoughts "on trial."

But Roche said after seeing posts on social media discussing people developing psychosis or being encouraged to make harmful decisions, he became disillusioned. The bots, he concluded, are sycophantic.

"When I look globally at the responsibilities of a therapist, it just completely fell on its face," he said.

This sycophancy – the tendency of apps based on large language models to empathize, flatter, or delude their human conversation partner – is inherent to the app design, experts in digital health say.

"The models were developed to answer a question or prompt that you ask and to give you what you're looking for," said Insel, the former NIMH director, "and they're really good at basically affirming what you feel and providing psychological support, like a good friend."

That's not what a good therapist does, though. "The point of psychotherapy is mostly to make you address the things that you have been avoiding," he said.

While polling suggests many users are satisfied with what they're getting out of ChatGPT and other apps, there have been high-profile reports about the service providing advice or encouragement to self-harm.

And at leastonedozenlawsuitsalleging wrongful death or serious harm have been filed against OpenAI after ChatGPT users died by suicide or became hospitalized. In most of those cases, the plaintiffs allege they began using the apps for one purpose – like schoolwork – before confiding in them. These cases are being consolidated into a class-action lawsuit.

Google and the startup Character.ai – which has been funded by Google and has created "avatars" that adopt specific personas, like athletes, celebrities, study buddies, or therapists – are settling other wrongful-death lawsuits, according tomedia reports.

OpenAI's CEO, Sam Altman, has said up to 1,500 people a week may talk about suicide on ChatGPT.

"We have seen a problem where people that are in fragile psychiatric situations using a model like 4o can get into a worse one," Altman said in a public question-and-answer session reported by The Wall Street Journal, referring to a particular model of ChatGPT introduced in 2024. "I don't think this is the last time we'll face challenges like this with a model."

An OpenAI spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment.

The company has said it works with mental health experts on safeguards, such as referring users to 988, the national suicide hotline. However, the lawsuits against OpenAI argue existing safeguards aren't good enough, and some research shows the problems are worsening over time. OpenAI has published its own data suggesting the opposite.

OpenAI is defending itself in court, offering, early in one case, a variety of defenses ranging from denying that its product caused self-harm to alleging that the defendant misused the product by inducing it to discuss suicide. It has also said it's working to improve its safety features.

Smaller apps also rely on OpenAI or other AI models to power their products, executives told KFF Health News. In interviews, startup founders and other experts said they worry that if a company simply imports those models into its own service, it might duplicate whatever safety flaws exist in the original product.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

If you or someone you know may be experiencing a mental health crisis, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by dialing or texting "988."

Data risks

KFF Health News' review of the App Store found listed age protections are minimal: Fifteen of the nearly four dozen apps say they could be downloaded by 4-year-old users; an additional 11 say they could be downloaded by those 12 and up.

Privacy standards are opaque. On the App Store, several apps are described as neither tracking personally identifiable data nor sharing it with advertisers – but on their company websites, privacy policies contained contrary descriptions, discussing the use of such data and their disclosure of information to advertisers, like AdMob.

In response to a request for comment, Apple spokesperson Adam Dema sentlinks to the company's App Store policies, which bar apps from using health data for advertising and require them to display information about how they use data in general. Dema did not respond to a request for further comment about how Apple enforces these policies.

Researchers and policy advocates said that sharing psychiatric data with social media firms means patients could be profiled. They could be targeted by dodgy treatment firms or charged different prices for goods based on their health.

KFF Health News contacted several app makers about these discrepancies; two that responded said their privacy policies had been put together in error and pledged to change them to reflect their stances against advertising. (A third, the team at OhSofia!, said simply that they don't do advertising, though their app's privacy policy notes users "may opt out of marketing communications.")

One executive told KFF Health News there's business pressure to maintain access to the data.

"My general feeling is a subscription model is much, much better than any sort of advertising," said Tim Rubin, the founder of Wellness AI, adding that he'd change the description in his app's privacy policy.

One investor advised him not to swear off advertising, he said. "They're like, essentially, that's the most valuable thing about having an app like this, that data."

"I think we're still at the beginning of what's going to be a revolution in how people seek psychological support and, even in some cases, therapy," Insel said. "And my concern is that there's just no framework for any of this."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

FOCUS

Photos by Talia Sprague / For the Chicago Tribune / TNS

Nancy Lally, age 105, reacts while telling a childhood story as her great-granddaughter Shannon Lally, left, grandson Kelly Lally and Amy Lally search through records of the newly unsealed records from the 1926 Ireland national census in Roselle, Illinois, on April 17.

'Those years went by so fast'

105-year-old Chicago woman finds herself on century-old Irish census

By TESS KENNY
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — One hundred years ago, a few thousand miles away across the Atlantic, a quiet moment in history rippled across northwestern Europe.

The day was April 18, 1926. Ireland was coming off centuries of British rule and a bloody civil war and hadn't paused to understand where it stood, or how it had changed, in years. But the young nation was dawning a new age. And that spring night, Ireland conducted its first census in more than a decade – its first as a free state.

Today, there are few living testaments to that headcount. But newly revealed records show that one of them is just a few miles outside of Chicago. And she's a spitfire.

At 105 years old, Roselle, Illinois, resident Nancy Lally is part of a group of centenarians whose names are on the Irish census of 1926, which the National Archives of Ireland digitized and publicly unveiled earlier this month after a century spent sealed by law.

Today, it's estimated there are at least 1,200 people still living who are on the demographic record. And while that number is likely greater, factoring in emigration and lineage lost over the decades, it represents just a tiny fraction of the nearly 3 million people tallied at the outset of Ireland's independence.

Lally was just 5 years old when the enumerators came to her family's farm in the Irish countryside. The officials took down her family's information, and her father signed at the bottom.

On April 18, at the stroke of midnight in Ireland on the 100th anniversary of the count, the long-awaited records went live. Lally waited for the moment with her grandson and great-granddaughters. Together, crowded on a couch in her northwest suburban home, they searched for their family's account on the National Archives website.

When her grandson announced that he had found the right form, Lally adjusted her wide-brimmed glasses with one hand, raised her eyebrows and leaned in close.

"Oh my god," she trailed off as she explored the page.

A touch of life

Prior to 1926, Ireland had already long kept systemic tabs on its population. The country's first successful census took place in 1821, followed by subsequent tallies taken every 10 years, according to the National Archives. That is, up until the 1911 census, after which unrest put the practice on pause.

Between late 1918 and 1921, Ireland was consumed by a war for independence against British rule, which had loomed over the island since the 12th century. Irish nationalists had rebelled against British rule for hundreds of years, but revolution started to become more palatable to the larger public during World War I, according to Sean Farrell, a history professor at Northern Illinois University and 19th century Irish historian.

A turning point was the Easter Rising rebellion, when Irish republicans revolted against British rule in 1916, Farrell said. Though rebels surrendered, the uprising set the stage for the broader push against British occupation and ultimately, the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. The tensions, however, didn't end there. What followed was a year of civil war, as the country fought over different visions for what it meant to be free and independent.

But by the mid-1920s, Ireland's focus shifted to garnering a greater sense of stability. The country began to take stock, starting with its inaugural census as a free state.

Officials polled for varying information. Yes, the basics of name, age and sex, but also birthplace, religion, occupation, even agricultural holdings. The 1926 census yielded more than 700,000 household returns, per the National Archives. It's those individual returns that Ireland just made openly accessible for the first time.

Ireland preserves census records under a 100-year-rule, which maintains that anything more than high-level data gleaned from population counts be kept sealed for a full century before they can be publicly released, National Archives Director Orlaith McBride told the Tribune.

The moratorium serves to balance personal privacy with humanizing history, according to the country's Central Statistics Office. McBride, for instance, pointed to census returns from sensitive locations.

"Certainly, (people wouldn't have wanted) that information … to be in the public domain in 1926," she said. But the idea is that over time, that kind of data loses its present-day implications and can eventually be unveiled to offer a snapshot of yesterday.

To prepare for the release of the 1926 census, archivists spent nearly three years conserving, digitizing and transcribing the decades-old data, McBride said. The state has also taken painstaking care to ensure that anyone and everyone can relish in the work.

The 1926 database is freely available online. As of Friday, some 33 million people had engaged with the digital records since they were released, including more than 1 million from the U.S. alone., according to the National Archives.

Nancy Lally, center, reads as her great-granddaughter Shannon Lally, left, and grandson Kelly Lally search through records of the new unsealed records from the 1926 Ireland national census with her family in Roselle, Illinois, on April 17. The 1926 census was the first official records of Ireland following independence from the United Kingdom in 1922.

Farrell, the historian, called the access remarkable.

"This openness … allows you to touch that life in a certain way, you know?" he said.

The moment enumerators came around and conducted the census isn't something that Lally remembers. But she and the count's other standing centenarians, and the physical records to show for their place in the juncture, provide a living link to the past. They paint a picture of what history looked like and how it's progressed in real-time, and – for Lally especially – outline the origin of a long and still continuing story that she herself can't quite grasp has stretched on for more than 100 years.

'I feel like I could still hold a job'

Lally still remembers the little things. She remembers growing up on her family's farm in County Wicklow and each spring, looking forward to feeding lambs by the bottle. She remembers the gallop of hooves as she rode in a buggy and when automobiles started to take over the road, much to her parent's chagrin.

She remembers the big candle her mother would bring out on Christmas, getting into trouble and dancing. There was lots of dancing.

Sitting down with the Tribune recently, Lally reminisced and revisited her life, which she recalled with impressive detail and a sharp tongue. Though she lost her hearing a couple of years ago, she fielded questions – floated via large bold type on a laptop – with ease.

"Honest to God, those years went by so fast," she said. "I can't believe my age. I feel like I could still hold a job."

Lally was born in Dublin in 1920. Her father was a countryman, but her mother loved the city. They married young and over the years, had 11 kids (Lally was the second oldest).

When Lally was 2 years old, her parents moved their family about 28 miles south of Dublin. Living in the countryside kept her relatively removed from the tumultuous period she'd been born into.

"(The farm) was wonderful," she said. "Filthy dirty, but it was healthy and happy. We always had plenty of fun and something to occupy our minds."

Lally recalled as a teenager going to parties at a nearby estate (a scene she likened to the "Hollywood crowd") and later, taking her first job at a drapery store in Dublin.

She stayed in Ireland until after World War II. Then Lally jetted off to London, a move she said "all the young ones" from her area made because there were better opportunities for work in England. She landed a gig as a waitress at a hotel, a real ritzy spot, and on weekends she'd go to socials to "dance (her) heart out," she said.

Lally never planned on getting married – she liked to keep free. But then she met John.

It was one of her brothers that introduced her to her husband, Lally said. At first, she thought he was weird. Still, after a little more time spent together, she learned he was refined, kind and loving. She married him when she was 29 years old. Lally moved back to Ireland – John worked for Guinness – and they started their family. But in the early 1950s, they were due for another move, this time across the ocean.

Lally had always wanted to immigrate to America. It wasn't until she'd married John, who had family in Chicago, that she had someone to follow. In 1953, with their 3-three-old son Ivan, they packed their things, got on a ship and sailed to the United States.

They settled on Chicago's West Side and that's where they stayed until they moved out of the city and into the western suburbs in the mid-60s. Ivan went on to serve in the Vietnam War, then returned to work as a police officer for the village of Hillside. Along the way, he had Kelly, Lally's grandson (who she called "the greatest joy of our lives").

Kelly followed in his father's footsteps. After a short stint in the Army, Kelly spent 27 years with the Carol Stream Police Department. He retired last year.

Today, Kelly visits his grandmother at her house in Roselle a couple of times a week. His two daughters, who are also local, likewise visit often. Kelly does the grocery shopping, but Lally still cleans and cooks for herself (and only takes one baby aspirin and one blood pressure pill a day).

Lally's been without John for nearly two decades, but her house is lined with framed memories – of him, of their family.

"It's been a good life," she said. Lally paused, then summed up the sentiment with a laugh.

"Working," she said, "(but) living for dances (on) the weekends."

A great honor

Kelly heard about the 1926 census through family still in Ireland. As the National Archives prepared to release the count this year, it had also launched an effort to find centenarians like Lally who would be willing to share first-hand testimony and act as representatives of the records.

"It's been on the TV and in the papers (in Ireland) for the last almost year and a half," Kelly said, recalling what their family abroad had told him.

The archives ultimately appointed 48 ambassadors. They span communities across Ireland and cities around the world.

Lally said she doesn't know how she feels about the attention. She's a quiet person, she explained, and has always kept to herself.

"This is my penance," she said wryly.

Her grandson thinks it's incredible. Their whole family does.

As they spoke with the Tribune, Kelly brought up their family's census ledger again on his phone. He zoomed in close on his great-grandfather's signature – William Byrne, it read in tilted cursive.

Seeing her dad's handwriting, Lally sighed.

"God love him," she said. "William, you were a great man."

She blew him a kiss.

Xiao Shu Patterson looks on as Dianne Ansari-Winn, reflected in Patterson's glasses, looks over her tiles during a monthly meeting of the Honour Tile Society mahjong club on Jan. 31, at Hot Shot Coffee in Denver.

Timothy Hurst / The Denver Post / TNS

These Mahjong clubs are hot, young – and play by different rules

By MIGUEL OTÁROLA
The Denver Post (TNS)

DENVER — The smell of sauteed shrimp wafted across the event hall behind Hot Shot Coffee in north Denver. Cody Peeler, standing behind a rice cooker and hot plate and next to trays of condiments, worried the aroma would offend the cafe's clientele.

But to the dozens of people who'd gathered on a Saturday morning in January to play mahjong, it was a most welcoming sign. It meant Peeler's mapo tofu gumbo station was open.

Food is a central component of the free monthly mahjong meet-up, the Honour Tile Society. Peeler and his partner, the club's founder, Tiffany Leong, are both chefs and now run the food pop-up, named Magnolion, at their mahjong events. The club's first meeting was in March of last year. Leong said she can consistently count on 40 to 60 people to attend each month now.

"Games move really quickly," Leong said. "You do have to frontload a lot of rules into your brain, but once you get going, it's really fast-paced, and it's not like some long, arduous tabletop game."

The click-clackety game of mahjong – where players draw, stack and discard tiles elegantly carved with Chinese symbols or characters – has exploded in popularity across the U.S. in recent years. In Denver, neighborhood or pay-to-play organizations have given players new outlets (although there are plenty of old ones as well), depending on what rules they want to follow.

Honour Tile Society events stick to old "Hong Kong rules," Leong said, with 14 tiles drawn in a counter-clockwise direction. Across town, members of the Cherry Creek North Neighborhood Association play an entirely different style, one regulated and revised annually by the National Mah Jongg League and American Mah-Jongg Association.

Denver's distinct cultures surrounding mahjong are a microcosm of the game's global expansion since first emerging in China in the 19th century. Though they differ in demographics, exclusivity and price range, local clubs offer many an opportunity to learn and bond over a game that may have a personal connection spanning generations and continents.

As the original game developed and diversified in Asian countries, an American businessman in Shanghai began shipping units to the U.S. with a simplified set of rules. In 1937, the National Mah Jongg League standardized the American variant. More recently, a climactic scene in the 2018 rom-com "Crazy Rich Asians," where a bride-to-be plays mahjong against her future mother-in-law, renewed interest in the game in the U.S., said Christine Voncannon, founder of the Cherry Creek North group.

The club meets weekly at the Ross-Cherry Creek Branch Library. There's no cost to play, though residents pay a nominal fee to the neighborhood association each year as dues, she said.

Voncannon, 54, first learned the game in Texas from her mother-in-law, Wanda Voncannon, in 2018. She developed a zeal for it, finding others who wanted to play on Nextdoor, the neighborhood social media site.

She started hosting games at her house after moving to Denver from Golden in 2024. In addition to the weekly association meetups, she plays with other parents at the Kent Denver School in Englewood, where her daughter attends. (The students started their own club that meets occasionally during lunch, she said.)

Hyoung Chang / The Denver Post / TNS

Christine Voncannon, top left, Pippa Lakeman, top right, Ellen Ittelson, bottom left, and Robin Gensburg play mahjong at Ross-Cherry Creek Branch Library in Denver, on Feb. 4.

Timothy Hurst / The Denver Post / TNS

Hien Kim, center, a more experienced player, gives advice to the rest of her table during a monthly meeting of the Honour Tile Society mahjong club on Jan. 31at Hot Shot Coffee in Denver.

Enterprising players of American mahjong have formed new companies with their own set of tiles and scorecards, rivaling the National Mah Jongg League, she said. Vacation packages and cruise lines advertise mahjong play. Celebrities – she highlighted Julia Roberts, Sarah Jessica Parker and Kelly Ripa – have evangelized about the game.

The play can get intense and competitive, but some people are more interested in the social component of mahjong, being next to neighbors and exchanging stories or game tips. So Voncannon likes to make room for both chit-chat and serious play.

"I've only known some of these women for a year in October, but I know about their families. I know about their surgeries. I know about their vacations," Voncannon said. "That growth of friendship is super important to the game."

At the Honour Tile Society event in January, younger players of Asian descent, like Leong, made constant connections between mahjong and their older family members, friends and neighbors.

"My mom and my grandma have always played. My grandma would play every week with her friends," she said.

Leong, whose Chinese family emigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam, was inspired to learn the game after reading a story in the New York Times about Green Tile Social Club, started after the COVID-19 pandemic by friends who'd attended the same college. So were some of her other Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) friends from the service industry. They watched YouTube videos and checked out a book from the library to get comfortable.

Their initial potluck and learning session turned into the monthly gathering it is today largely through their strong followings on social media, she said. (Honour Tile Society posts about meet-ups and shares registration links on Instagram.) The Society now draws from all crowds, including many people learning mahjong for the first time.

A table in one corner of the event space was sprinkled with some more experienced players. Adam Pham, 39, cupped his hand over a tile and drew it up to his face so others could not see.

Pham's game included 27-year-old Audrey Kent, 36-year-old Adam Wedgewood and 37-year-old Kevin Chen. The play was fluid and quiet. Once or twice a game, someone would clarify a move or tile, something Chen and Pham agreed is common, given that house rules, along with what Chen called "auntie rules," vary greatly.

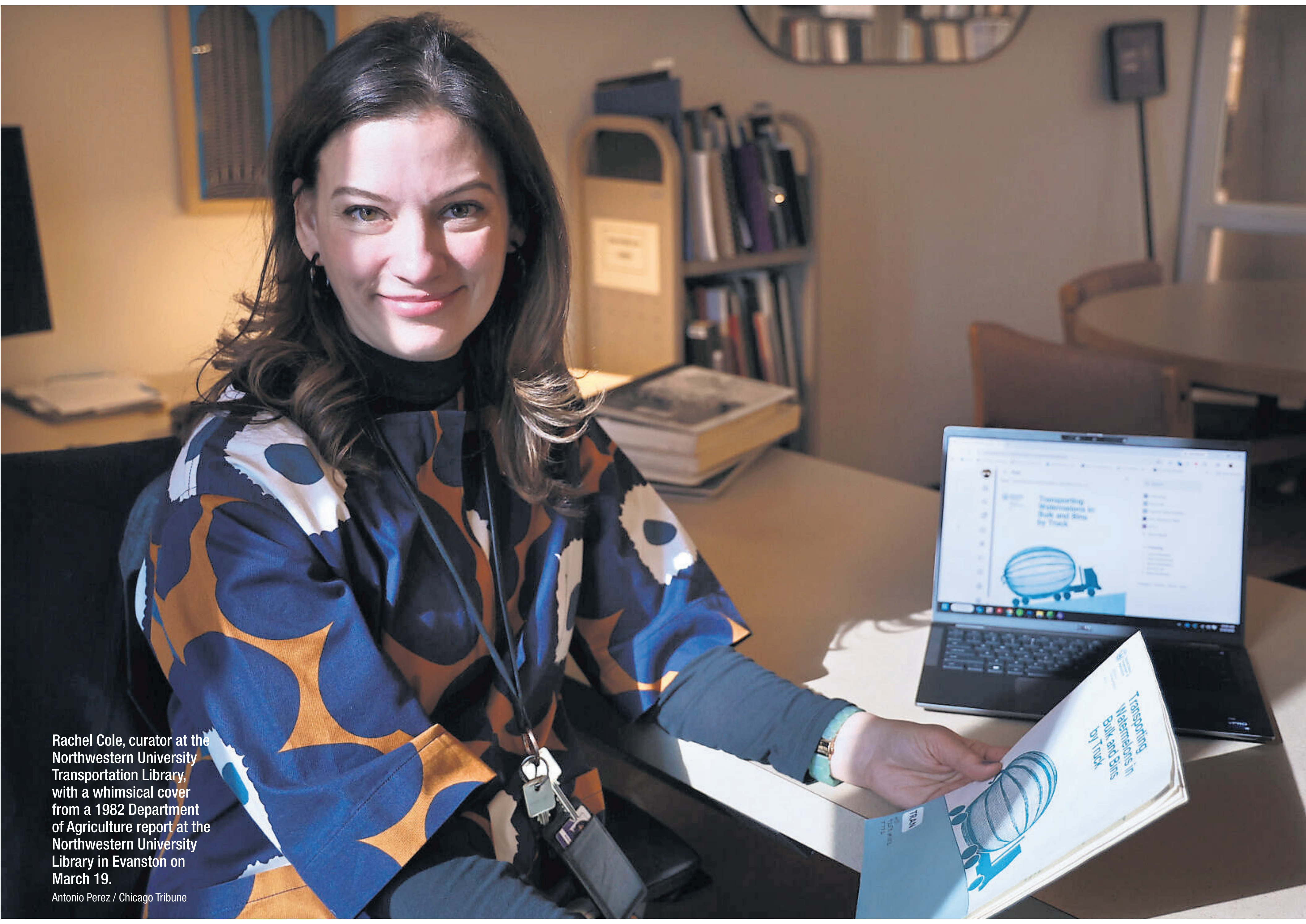
"The real Chinese or Taiwanese aunties that play are very intense. I'm afraid of that," Chen said, eliciting agreement from Pham and Kent. "You'll get yelled at if you're taking too long."

Luck, too, can give a beginner an edge.

Nick Dalton, chef of Brasserie Brixton, was at his first Honour Tile Society event playing another game at the same table. He hesitantly announced his hand. "I think I won," he said.

A learned player looked over each of the tiles in his hand, laying each one down with its characters facing up. He had indeed won.

FOCUS



Rachel Cole, curator at the Northwestern University Transportation Library, with a whimsical cover from a 1982 Department of Agriculture report at the Northwestern University Library in Evanston on March 19.

Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune

Flashback!

There was a time when government reports were works of art

By NINA METZ
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

CHICAGO — Government reports tend to make for less-than-scintillating reading. That's the nature of the beast. Data can be dry.

But for the better part of the 20th century, the covers of these reports were works of art.

"Transporting Watermelons in Bulk and Bins by Truck," a 1982 report for the Department of Agriculture, features an illustration of a semi-truck. But instead of hauling a trailer, the cargo is one gigantic watermelon, with an adorable tail on the end.

A 1964 annual report for the Missouri State Highway Commission titled "A Report of Highway Death in Missouri" appears to be inspired by the minimalist, geometric movie posters created by Saul Bass in the '50s and '60s. Against a black background, the red lettering of the title is all but crushing a prone human form. The title may be clinical and detached; the image on its cover is anything but.

Rachel Cole is the curator at the Northwestern University Transportation Library and she has been scanning these report covers and then posting them in an ever-expanding Bluesky thread as a way to interest the general public in the library's catalog.

At one time, it wasn't uncommon for universities to have a dedicated library focused on all things transportation. That's no longer the case.

There's one at the University of California, Berkeley, but "they don't have a physical collection like they did in the past," Cole says. "The University of Michigan still maintains its transportation collection, but doesn't have a dedicated library or librarian overseeing it. We're really the only one of our kind, with over 500,000 volumes related to all modes of transportation: Car, boat, train, aviation, bicycle, pedestrian. We say if it moves people or goods, we collect in that area."

Founded in 1958, the transportation library is located within Northwestern's main library on the fifth floor and it is open to the public. "We're tied to the transportation center here on campus," says Cole, "so things like engineering, but also how that impacts the environment and the economy, as well as social impacts."

Her work often requires going into the stacks for research materials, and she inevitably comes across these old reports. "They're just such fun images and I wanted to share them with someone."

She maintains an Instagram account for the library that's focused on transportation ephemera – "airline menus, timetables, photograph albums, that sort of thing" – but the report covers have a "different aesthetic and different perspective about transportation, so that's why I thought I'd share them on BlueSky instead. They're really interesting for the visual aspect. A lot of thought and care was put into these covers on topics that might be considered mundane. But I'm also interested in what they tell you about transportation history throughout the 20th century."

A 1976 report for the Department of Transportation is titled "Problems of the Carless" and it features an illustration of a man with a cane and a bag of groceries, alone at a desolate bus stop.

A 1974 report for the Department of Transportation titled "Bikeways – State of the Art" has an illustration drawn in the style of MAD Magazine's Mort Zucker of a besuited man standing next to a highway, chipping a bicycle from a mound of concrete. He's attacking the job with gusto!

And a report from 1977 titled "Low-Fare, Fare-Free Transit: some recent applications by U.S. transit systems" features a triptych on its cover. The first panel shows a man waiting for public transit and it's labeled "fare 50 cents." In the second, it's a man and two women waiting, "fare 25 cents." The third shows an entire crowd that's labeled "fare free." The drawings have a sense of whimsy, yes, but are also very clearly telling a story.

"What's so striking about these reports is that they are half a century old, and yet we're still talking about the same issues and still haven't figured this stuff out satisfactorily," Cole says.

It's fascinating to consider that, at one time, government agencies dedicated money and energy to the messaging conveyed by this cover art.

Guy Villa is a graphic designer who is co-owner of the studio Sharon and Guy with his wife and fellow artist Sharon Oiga. He is also a professor at Columbia College Chicago who teaches graphic design.

"The perfect example is the report on Missouri highway deaths," he said. "I'm a big fan of Saul Bass and that image is mimicking the poster for 1959's 'Anatomy of a Murder.' And it's like, wow, someone was actually brave enough to put a dead body at the bottom of an annual report. Even the typography is very post-modern. I think they wanted to get enough readers engaged to show: This is a serious thing that is happening. And that cover is going to catch your eye in a way that just putting basic typography on a white background isn't."

Cole also finds that one interesting "because many times an agency may want to highlight its accomplishments for the year, or a new road-building project, but here they're highlighting the dangers of traffic and traffic deaths. That they're highlighting the ways that they haven't succeeded is really interesting."

Despite an emphasis on car-centric infrastructure since World War II, there was pushback to that. "It's rare that you come across it, but it was there." And these covers are a fascinating reminder of that. "Whenever I can highlight issues of road safety for pedestrians and cyclists, I do," says Cole.

Not much is known about the individual artists behind these covers. Some might have worked in-house. "I know that decades ago, many of these departments of transportation or ports had their own in-house design teams," Cole says. But it was more common that outside firms would be commissioned on a project-by-project basis.

"There was a trend of being really creative with annual reports in the '50s, '60s and '70s, and then that died down," says Villa. "And then in the mid-'80s to late-'90s, there was a resurgence of being really creative, to the point where some design firms, all they did were annual reports. That was their bread-and-butter."

He mentions the 1999 book "I Am Almost Always Hungry" from the design firm Cahan & Associates. "Half of the book is about their annual reports and fielding questions about 'How did you get away with that?' And the owner says they didn't get away with it – they had to present an argument to the client and say, for example, this data about road deaths is detrimental to people's lives and this is what's going to convey that information. It's about trying to humanize dense information.

"Whereas if you look at reports now, usually it's a white background with the logo or the seal. They almost look like a non-designer did it."

That trend is confirmed by Cole, who says the shift began around 2012, when instead of being printed as hard copies, reports started being disseminated as PDFs. A confluence of factors is at work: Budgets are tighter, and fast and cheap is the expectation. Enter: Clip art, stock photos and generative AI. Suddenly, you don't need to hire a graphic designer for your report; you can just ask Fred down the hall to slap together something and call it a day.

"There's maybe this idea that you don't need great graphic design because people are going to read it on their computer or their phone and scroll right by the title page anyway," Villa says.

A 1972 report for the Department of Transportation titled "Transportation Noise and its Control" has a deep aqua background with various modes of transportation (a helicopter, a motorcycle and so on) depicted in an orangey red and surrounded by thin white lines. Someone gave thought to which colors work best. And thought about: Why am I adding these thin white outlines? "When I saw that, it's like noise is emanating from each vehicle," says Villa. In other words, there's an intention there. A reason behind the visual choices. An AI image will never be able to provide that.

Researchers have found that our brains process reading a physical book differently than when using an e-reader, which strips away that physical connection. Perhaps reading a report as a PDF strips away something meaningful, as well.

What if gorgeous and distinctive, well-thought-out graphic art on a cover page of a physical report meant that the data inside became "sticky," and if you had to refer to it again, you could more easily dig through a stack on your desk to find the right one because it had that memorable cover?

Sometimes these old report titles were creative, as well. One report on parking issues is called "The Big Squeeze." Another is titled "Parking Pickle."

But the visuals dominate.

Villa was impressed with a 1979 report for the Department of Energy with the title "The Charge of the Future: An Introduction to Electric and Hybrid Vehicles."

"How do you visualize an electric car? Because if you look at any electric car today, it looks like a regular car. So what they did was cut up these images of cars and then put them back together, but slightly off. It's deconstruct-reconstruct, and that kind of 'electrifies' the image. I thought that was a really cool idea."

Another is from 1977 for the Department of Transportation with a title that could easily make the reader's eyes glaze over: "The National Maximum Speed Limit: A Summary of Three Regional Workshops." But the cover art looks like it could be a movie poster for a paperwork thriller. There's a sense of drama that's conveyed by its stylized image of men hunched around a table with placards identifying them: "governor's rep," "state patrol" and so on. A large sign looms in the background: Speed limit 55.

Contrast that to the more generic report covers of today, which tend to follow a forgettable template. The 2025 report for the federal government on transportation statistics features some photos (a steering wheel, a plane, a ferry, etc.) that are framed into triangular shapes for no particular reason, other than to jazz up what are otherwise incredibly dull images.

"You want to make a report memorable, inviting and easy to understand," says Villa. "And when you look at this, you know there was no graphic designer involved. Someone in-house was probably told: We need you to put this together."

That may be preferable when time and money are in short supply.

But something gets lost when we strip artists from the process.

The world is more interesting – more engaging but also more wondrous – when thought and care for aesthetics is built into even the most mundane tasks and objects.

Aleutie / Dreamstime / TNS

Why paying off my mortgage early was the best financial decision I ever made

By TED ROSSMAN
Bankrate.com (TNS)

My wife and I bought our home in 2013 using a $417,000 30-year mortgage at a fixed rate of 4.625 percent. In 2020, we paid it off 23 years ahead of schedule, saving about a quarter of a million dollars in interest.

Owning our home without a monthly payment provides tremendous peace of mind. There's a lot of "sleep at night" value associated with not worrying about those payments. Our shelter is secure even if I lose my job or the stock market tanks, you name it.

What worked for us understandably isn't an option for everyone – and it admittedly required some thoughtful sacrifices on our part to make it happen – but if you can swing it, here's what you stand to gain beyond those restful nights of sleep.

Let's run the numbers

The savings sound impressive, but many financial experts would mathematically push back on our decision, pointing out that 4.625 percent is a relatively low cost to borrow money. Instead of paying off our mortgage early, some would say we should have invested the extra money in the stock market where historical returns have averaged about 10 percent a year.

But besides the peace of mind (which is considerable), the opportunity math works out better than some might think. Consider that we can now afford to take more risk with our investments. My wife and I are in our early 40s, and our retirement plans are invested 100 percent in stocks. The conventional wisdom says your stock allocation should be 100 percent minus your age, or perhaps 110 percent minus your age given that people are living longer these days. Under that guidance, we should be invested about 60-70 percent in stocks with the remainder in safer instruments like bonds and cash.

But we can push the pedal to the metal with a riskier (and, we hope, more rewarding) stock allocation in part because our mortgage is paid off, which removes considerable risk from other parts of our financial lives. The stock market is inherently risky in the short term, but historically rewarding in the long run. You could lose money in stocks today or this month or even this year, but over a time horizon of 10 years or longer, it's virtually certain you'll come out ahead.

Beyond the long-term benefits, being mortgage-free also means we're able to spend more freely on short-term opportunities, such as travel and after-school activities for our kids. If we still had a hefty monthly mortgage payment, we wouldn't be able to do all those things.

Lastly, because our housing is secure, we can get by with a smaller emergency savings fund, freeing up that money for other long- and short-term opportunities. The standard advice is to have three to six months' worth of expenses in the bank. Without a $2,000+ monthly mortgage principal and interest payment, that's $6,000 to $12,000 less that we need to incorporate into our rainy day fund.

The hidden costs of homeownership persist

We aren't completely free from housing costs, of course. For starters, there's the pesky issue of property taxes. We live in a New York suburb with high property taxes (approximately $20,000 per year, or an average of about $1,667 per month). We also pay roughly $2,800 a year ($233 a month) for homeowners' insurance. And there are the inevitable maintenance issues. This winter, for instance, we needed several thousand dollars' worth of plumbing and heating repairs, plus a new dryer.

Because of the hidden costs of homeownership, our housing isn't completely free even though we paid off our mortgage. Still, doing so created a lot of room in our monthly budget for those other costs of homeownership. If we'd kept our 30-year mortgage, we'd be paying $2,144 per month in principal and interest, plus another roughly $1,900 in property taxes and homeowners' insurance for a grand total of about $4,000 per month in housing costs (not including the more variable expenses of maintenance and repairs).

Eliminating our mortgage lowered our monthly housing payment by half. That's like living in the New York City area but paying the housing costs of a much more affordable town in the South or Midwest.

So how, exactly, did I manage to pay off my mortgage early?

We were fortunate to be in a position to pay off our mortgage as quickly as we did. The breakthrough event came in 2017 when Bankrate was acquired, accelerating the vesting of several years' worth of stock options. I used most of that money to recast our mortgage.

With a recast, a little known cousin of refinancing, you put a lump sum toward your mortgage principal and the lender recalculates your remaining principal and interest fees over the existing term at the existing interest rate. I put $250,000 into a mortgage recast, lowering my mortgage payment by $1,400 per month. It was a quick and easy process. I paid a one-time $250 fee and filled out a short form.

Refinancing, on the other hand, involves taking out an entirely new loan. It's a popular tactic when mortgage rates fall since refinancing pays off your old loan and gets you into a lower-rate product that reduces your monthly payments.

I preferred the recast for several reasons.

- Rates were actually a bit higher than our original loan when we did the recast in 2018.
- I didn't want to restart the clock on another 30-year loan, or even a 15-year mortgage.
- I didn't want to deal with refinancing's considerable paperwork, closing costs, appraisal fees or other rigamarole.

In 2018, we didn't have enough money to completely pay off the mortgage, but we knew we would benefit from the lower monthly payments resulting from the recast. And I figured that we could pay off the remaining mortgage principal in two or three years if we were disciplined about paying a bit extra from time to time. For example, by putting extra money in when we got a tax refund or a bonus. Or by paying more when our cash flow allowed for it, including the idea of trying to stick with the old payment at least some of the time, even though the recast meant we could pay $1,400 less that month.

We didn't keep up with the Joneses

One thing we didn't do: Trade up to a more expensive home. Our income has risen substantially since we bought our house in 2013 (of course, many of our expenses have risen substantially as well – having a couple of kids will do that to you). Still, on paper, at least, we could qualify for a mortgage on a much more expensive property.

We have resisted the temptation. We got off the treadmill of monthly mortgage payments, and we don't want to get back on it. We also genuinely like our home and have customized it in various ways over the years. Is it the fanciest house in the fanciest neighborhood? Hardly. But it suits us.

The math behind mortgage prepayments

If you're enticed by the idea of becoming mortgage-free ahead of schedule, consider this mortgage prepayment example.

Even making just one extra monthly payment a year can trim a 30-year loan into a 24-year payback cycle.

If you borrowed $400,000 for 30 years at a fixed rate of 6.44 percent (the current average, according to Bankrate), your monthly principal and interest payments would be $2,513. Paying an extra $2,513 in principal each year retires the loan almost six years early and saves nearly $110,000 in interest. That's incredible, and it shouldn't be that difficult to do.

If you get paid every two weeks, there are two months every year when you receive three paychecks. Consider putting some or all of that money toward your mortgage principal. You could also consider using other found money such as tax refunds, bonuses and gifts. Taking on a side hustle is another great way to drum up some extra cash. As is looking for ways to cut your expenses and wringing some extra savings out of your monthly cash flow.

The bottom line

To be clear, paying off a mortgage ahead of schedule is a luxury. If you have credit card debt at 20 percent interest and a mortgage at 6 percent, put your extra money toward the credit cards. If you have a dangerously low emergency savings cushion, save for a rainy day before prepaying a 30-year loan.

But if you have a little extra money now or in the future, prepaying a mortgage provides tremendous peace of mind as well as tangible financial benefits.

Have a question about managing your money? E-mail me at ted.rossman@bankrate.com and I'd be happy to help.

Visit Bankrate online at bankrate.com.

Dreamstime / TNS

While the gender pay gap has widened in recent years, women are taking advantage of paths to wealth-building such as owning real estate.

The state of women's finances

How homeownership is becoming the great equalizer

By ANA STAPLES
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Finance is different for everyone. We all inhabit our own money realities: white people and people of color, Gen Z and baby boomers, high earners and those with lower incomes.

Women live in their own financial reality, too. One where the gender pay gap is a force holding back their progress, seeping into every aspect of their financial well-being. One where caregiving responsibilities often fall on their shoulders, affecting their careers.

Yet numbers show women's resilience in the face of these obstacles. They routinely negotiate to earn more money. They buy more homes than men despite struggling with upfront costs, improving their long-term financial security. They might not always feel good about their finances, but they remain optimistic nevertheless.

We gathered Bankrate data from the past year to paint a financial portrait of today's American woman. Learn about their struggles and how they overcome these challenges – from the statistics, financial experts and women themselves.

The pay gap has a ripple effect – and it's growing again

On average, women make less money than men do for the same work. This fact has a snowball effect on their long-term financial security. And, despite all the progress, this issue has proven persistent.

For the first time since the 1990s, the gender pay gap has widened for two consecutive years, a Bankrate analysis of Census Bureau data found. In 2024, women working full time, year-round earned 81 cents for every dollar men earned – down from 83 cents the year before and 84 cents in 2022.

Women working full-time lose $542,800 due to the pay gap over a 40-year career, according to the American Association of University Women's analysis of Census Bureau data. That's more than half a million dollars that could fundamentally change the financial fortunes of not just one woman, but could also lay groundwork for generational wealth in the form of long-term investments, retirement savings or purchasing a home that builds equity. Consider that the median sales price of a house in the U.S. is a little over $405,000, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

And the inequity often begins early in a woman's working years, compounding the problem. At the critical step from entry level to manager, only 93 women are promoted for every 100 men, and the gap is wider for women of color (74 per 100 men), according to the Women in the Workplace 2025 report by McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org. Further, women only make up 29 percent of C-suite roles, and their share shrinks with each leadership level. The study also found that while women remain as committed to their careers as men, they face persistent structural barriers that limit their advancement.

"People make a lot of assumptions about women's behavior… and treat them based on those assumptions," says Kate Bahn, senior vice president and chief economist at the Institute for Women's Policy Research. "People will assume that women aren't as ambitious as men, and so they receive fewer mentorship opportunities and promotion opportunities, even if they actually are just as ambitious."

But women advocate for higher earnings, and that ripples, too

The gender pay gap makes it all the more crucial for women to advocate for themselves and seek higher pay – and many women do. Forty-six percent of women said they had successfully negotiated a raise during their professional careers, according to Bankrate's Financial Habits survey. That's more than women who said they never had (36 percent). Moreover, 23 percent of women said they had negotiated a pay raise at least once a year.

Increasing your income needs to happen on a regular basis, says Rita-Soledad Fernández Paulino, founder and CEO of Wealth Para Todos, a financial coaching and education platform that works to remove barriers to financial security for marginalized communities.

"Inflation is going up, and a lot of times, our income isn't keeping up," she explains.

Besides leaving more room in the budget for everyday spending and long-term wealth building, a higher income can lead to a lower debt-to-income ratio (DTI) if you don't increase your debt. A lower DTI can result in further savings as you're likely to get better terms when qualifying for credit, whether it's a mortgage or an auto loan.

Aleksa Diaz, 30, is a tech support agent in a tech company in Austin, Texas. She learned to negotiate straight out of college when she asked her first employer to add $5,000 to the offer. Today, she's looking for a new role and utilizing AI to prepare for negotiations.

"It gave me some really good prompts and asked me some really good questions to showcase the skills that I have that would give the most leverage for a successful negotiation," she explains.

Being prepared is something Fernández Paulino also highlights. She recommends looking for data on salaries for specific positions within a field while keeping in mind the value of skills and expertise a woman can bring. Sources such as Glassdoor, ZipRecruiter and Indeed can be helpful in this kind of research.

Adena DeMonte, a 42-year old marketing professional in San Jose, California, also understands the importance of negotiation. In the past, she had opportunities where she increased her salary by $10,000 to $20,000 or had benefits added.

"Once a company decides they want you, you really have to just look at the job market and what your value is," she says. "Things have definitely changed over time, and I look at that too, but most companies won't offer you the most that they can offer."

Still, difficulty saving plagues women on their path to wealth building

Even if women successfully negotiate for raises, their lifetime lower earnings have a snowball effect on their financial lives. A lower income means less money to cover everyday expenses, which can easily lead to debt. It's no wonder that half of women who have credit cards (50 percent) carry a balance month to month, according to Bankrate's Credit Card Debt Report. And while men and women equally cite emergency expenses as the most common reason they carry a carry card balance, female cardholders who carry a balance are more likely than their male counterparts to say their debt is mainly due to day-to-day expenses such as groceries, childcare or utilities (35 percent vs. 29 percent).

When money goes toward basic necessities and debt repayment, saving money becomes challenging. In the absence of emergency funds, long-term goals like homeownership and retirement savings can take a backseat. Besides, a high credit card balance can have a negative impact on your overall credit health. Credit utilization is the second most influential credit factor after payment history. Using a high percentage of your credit line is likely to have a significant negative effect on your scores. Plus, it raises your DTI, which in turn impacts the terms of other credit you apply for, including your mortgage rate.

Once again, however, some women are making sacrifices in other areas of their lives to save for retirement, emergencies or homeownership. Still, sometimes it's the feeling of financial security that's missing regardless of the numbers.

"Does anyone have enough savings right now?" DeMonte asks.

A homeowner and a mother of three, DeMonte feels good about where she is financially but recognizes she's been fortunate to save and invest in her 20s. Plus, the shifting job market creates a degree of uncertainty, and the question of having savings to live off of still concerns her.

"It's taken me a long time to get to a place where I feel like I have decent savings, but it's not the type of savings that will last forever," she says.

Diaz doesn't feel like any number would be enough. Since she's dealing with chronic health conditions, she relies on her health insurance heavily. Without it, she'd have to go back to her home country of Mexico where her current savings would last her eight to 10 months, she says – as opposed to four to six in the United States.

"Maybe if I had like $200,000 in savings, I would feel like that's enough for me. But I'm not at that number yet."

Alyssa Armstrong, 29, is an outlier. Armstrong lives in Port Townsend, Washington, and owns an email and retention agency. She feels she has enough savings, but admits that mentally, it has been an ongoing battle.

"If you're someone who has a frugality mindset… you can fall into the slippery slope of feeling like you never have enough," she says. "For me, I started to feel that way when we were preparing to have our firstborn a year ago. It was really easy to start to feel like we just don't have enough… But when I look back and reflect back on my actual history as an adult, we're covered in case of emergency and then some."

The feeling of never having enough savings despite the actual number is your bank account might be a sign of financial trauma, Fernández Paulino says. Some women witnessed financial struggles their family members went through, whether it was foreclosures, bankruptcies or health issues that caused their loved ones to stop working. Such experiences can lead to a money hoarding mindset and failing to invest.

"If the money is not going to be used for more than three years, you should be investing that money and watching your money make money while you sleep," Fernández Paulino says.

Homeownership remains a path to wealth and women are taking advantage

One of the pillars of long-term security for many Americans is homeownership. The median net worth of renters is $10,400, which is about 39 times lower compared to homeowners' median net worth of $396,200, based on the most recent data from the Federal Reserve.

For women, home equity can provide a security net to rely on later in life, which is significant considering the pay gap makes it harder to save for retirement. But buying a house is a huge undertaking, and one full of financial challenges. The initial costs can be an especially tough barrier. Three in 4 women who are aspiring homeowners (75 percent) see expenses from down payments and closing costs as a significant obstacle to buying, according to Bankrate's Down Payment Survey.

DeMonte and her husband bought their home in 2020. She had a role at a company that offered restricted stock units which she said did well for a couple of years. Plus, the family had lived in a one-bedroom rental apartment until DeMonte was pregnant with her second child, and that helped them save a lot over time.

"That got me to a place with my husband where we could put the down payment down," she says. "We have a relatively low payment compared to if we were to buy the same house today."

The housing market today is vastly different from what it was during the pandemic when mortgage rates fluctuated at around 3 percent, according to the Bankrate data. For the past three years, they've rarely dipped below 6 percent, exacerbating the affordability issue.

Still, despite all the obstacles, women remain a powerful force in the homebuying market. To them, homeownership may feel like a milestone to achieve, Fernández Paulino says. Financial independence was out of reach for women for a long time in American history. But many modern women grew up on media that showed them they didn't have to depend on anyone. They had role models who made financial goals like buying a house appear more accessible. Forty years ago, only 11 percent of first-time homebuyers were women (only 9 percent were men), according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR). In 2025, women made up 25 percent or first-time homebuyers, compared to just 10 percent of single men. Overall, 21 percent of all homebuyers are single women, compared to only 9 percent of single men.

Several factors that might be contributing to these statistics. For instance, women are still more likely to be caregivers in their families and purchase a house to be near their loved ones, the NAR writes. Another potential factor is kids. Single women are more likely to have children in the home and slightly more likely to buy a multigenerational home.

Additionally, women appear more prepared to make financial sacrifices to purchase a home. Forty-one percent of women make financial sacrifices compared to 31 percent of men who buy homes, according to the NAR.

To women who want to join the ranks of homeowners but struggle with homebuying costs, Fernández Paulino recommends looking at down payment assistance programs. Possible options vary by state and specific area, as well as qualification terms.

"One that I personally had looked into is called the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America," Fernández Paulino shares. "They don't require you to put the whole 20 percent down. They support you in terms of [getting] a lower interest rate and all of that."

Women feel financially insecure – but also optimistic

With the persistence of the gender pay gap and anxiety about not having enough savings, it's no wonder that about 3 in 5 working women (62 percent) feel behind where they should be with their retirement savings, according to Bankrate's retirement savings survey. These worries are more than legitimate, considering more than 4 in 5 retired women (82 percent) are likely to rely on Social Security benefits, according to Bankrate's Social Security Survey.

The prevalence of worries about long-term financial security takes its toll: Money is a stressor for a lot of women. Forty-five percent of women say money negatively impacts their mental health at least occasionally, according to Bankrate's Money and Mental Health Survey.

This kind of anxiety may be especially intense for women who don't own a home. Having enough equity provides an opportunity to borrow money at a low interest rate through a home equity loan or home equity line of credit. While using a home as collateral carries certain risk, equity can still be a financial cushion for a woman later in life.

"I think everybody feels stressed about money," DeMonte says. Her family lives rather frugally, flying with Frontier when it saves money and driving a 2005 Prius with 260,000 miles on it.

"We recently bought a 2021 Honda Odyssey to fit our third kid," she says.

DeMonte feels good about where her family is financially, and she is grateful. Still, money is a stress, and she worries about the job market and how it's shaped by the growing influence of AI.

Still, despite all the difficulties and worries, many women remain optimistic. Forty-five percent of women believe they will feel financially secure one day, Bankrate's Financial Freedom Survey found.

Armstrong is one of the women who can say she feels financially secure. Even though money is inherently stressful, she has no high-interest debt, feels good about her savings and is positive about where her retirement account balance is. The best thing you can do, she says, is to stop comparing yourself to the people around you.

"It can be really easy to feel overwhelmed with things about personal finance," she says, "or you can feel like you have to rely on someone else to tell you what to do. But you're so much more capable than you think you are."

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FOOD

What cookies can tell us about 250 years of American history

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Here's the thing about cookies: No matter where you live, you probably love them.

Whether they're a quick snack after dinner, a sweet treat tucked into a lunchbox or a labor of love made by relatives or members of Facebook's Wedding Cookie Table Community, cookies simply make us happy.

The small "test cakes" that originated in Persia in the 7th century were eventually brought by Dutch settlers to America in the 1600s (they called them "koekje"). They have been bringing joy ever since.

Cookies are a harbinger of culture and technological advances, as well as a marker of the state of economy, politics and changes in consumer tastes and eating habits.

For instance, who knew that condensed milk dated from the Civil War? Or that cookie has sometimes been spelled cookey and cooky?

Or that Eggo wasn't originally a waffle? It was a popular powder – Egg-O – used to supplement or replace eggs in cakes, puddings and custards in the early 20th century. And perhaps most interesting for today's bakers, that the cup and teaspoon measures used today didn't become standardized until 1896, thanks to Fanny Farmer.

The source of all of these tasty bits of trivia is Linda Tennant Saus of Moon, who has been a member of the Wedding Cookie Table Community on Facebook for five years,

The retired software engineer discovered these pieces of cookie history (and countless others) while helping to organize the group's upcoming Cookie Table University at Hilton Garden Inn, Pittsburgh/Southpointe on April 19 with WCTC founder Laura Magone and fellow member Robin Gail Wooten of Spurger, Texas.

Since its first "college" in 2018, the group has organized the annual event around a theme. With the country's 250th birthday on the horizon, the three women decided it might be fun to compile an equal number of cookie recipes to share and display on two professionally styled, 40-foot cookie tables where attendees, after much oohing and aahing, will choose a dozen cookies to take home.

Then the organizers challenged themselves. They decided that each recipe must be connected in some way to an important historical figure, event or era-specific ingredient that helped tell the country's history – ideally, one for each year since 1776.

"We thought, 'What's the hardest thing we could think of?'" Magone joked as she baked one of the cookie recipes in her mother's "steelworker" kitchen in Monongahela.

Actually, the idea came from wedding decorator and planner Mona D'Ambrosia of Mona's Unique Boutique in Johnstown.

"But as soon as she said it, I went to my [Monongahela Area] Historical Society team, and they loved it," Magone says.

For such a large project (there will be 1,500 or so attendees over two sessions), organizers would need lots of volunteer bakers. Yet they felt it was possible given the community's size – 406,000 members in the U.S and internationally.

"We just had to remain positive about it," says Wooten, a retired nurse. "We knew our girls and men would step up."

First, they had to come up with a working list of memorable people and events over the last 250 years that could be tied to a cookie in some way.

They began by researching what early settlers ate, and what Native Americans taught them about local ingredients like popcorn and maple syrup. They also read up on technique; baking way back then was often done on hearthstones instead of in ovens, "so there were a lot of hardship," Magone says.

One early source that proved the group was on to something was "The First American Cookbook" by Amelia Simmons, a facsimile of the first American-written cookbook published in the U.S. in 1796. (While there wasn't a chapter on cookies, it included two recipes for Christmas cookies.)

The website archive.org, a digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts, also proved invaluable for generating ideas, says Saus, who was tasked with getting all the chosen recipes in order for an eventual cookbook.

"You can find old cookbooks through them, and that helps you think about the people and events in history and the cookie you can relate to them," she says.

Other references included "Fannie Farmer's 1896 Cookbook"; "What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking," which is considered the first African-American cookbook published (in 1881); Mary Randolph's "The Virginia House-wife" from 1824; 1984's "The Italian Bakery" by Lee Mangione Cirillo; and "Betty Crocker's Cooky Book" (1963).

Many had to be adapted either because the original recipes included ingredients that are no longer available, like lard or pearlash (we now use baking soda and powder as leavening agents), or they measured flour and sugar in teacups or spoonfuls instead of teaspoons, tablespoons, cups or ounces.

"There might not be directions on how to mix," Saus says, "and if there were any oven suggestions, it was 'cool' or 'moderate.' You were just expected to know about it."

Wooten, who joined the group years ago to help ease the pain of losing her son, Mickey, is in charge of not only making sure the recipes are sound and include a historical backstory, but also matching them to volunteer bakers based on skill level by looking at what they've baked and posted on Facebook.

Wooten says bakers often think they're less talented than they really are. So once she made sure the recipe was a sound starting point, she encouraged them to "make it yours" by being creative while following basic guidelines.

"Put the recipe in your own words," the instruction letter read. "You know our audience. They love the 'folksiness' of our Community and cookbook. Add what you think is important matters. Make the recipe your own. Our members count on getting helpful pointers and tips and instructions that are easy to understand."

Bakers, who also must provide a picture of the cookies for the cookbook, have "really stepped up," Saus says.

Some recipes, especially more modern ones, are fairly clear. Others, not so much.

The first baker to sign up, Illinois native Mary Hodges, is making the original 1913 recipe for Girl Scout cookies along with the loaded oatmeal cookies singer/songwriter John Legend has been baking since his teens.

Cookie University attendees can also expect to find original Toll House cookies, George Washington cherry-studded "hatchet" cookies, the sesame biscotti favored by Frank Sinatra and Joe DeMaggio, Taylor Swift's famed chai cookies and sweets made with Tang, which was used on early NASA space flights (and you can still purchase at Walmart).

One of the tougher recipes, made to honor Martin Luther King Jr., is a cookie version of a favorite gelatinized cousin of ambrosia known as a "quilly." A rainbow-colored cookie will approximate ones Fred Rogers made with Chef Brocket in a 1968 episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Magone is making a cookie she grew up mixing and baking alongside her mom, who died last year at age 100. The budget-friendly "poor man's cookie" from the Great Depression era is being updated with whole milk Greek yogurt instead of shortening.

"Anytime school had a bake sale, we made them," she says.

Wooten, who first heard about the group while traveling to Pittsburgh for her son's treatment – he was severely injured in the military in 2008 and flown to UPMC – isn't just herding the volunteer bakers via a live spreadsheet. She also is making a blueberry pudding cookie based on Franklin D. Roosevelt's favorite dessert, which was served in the White House during his presidency. She'll use fresh blueberries from her farm in Texas.

"It's great because you get to learn history and read about the person," Wooten says.

In choosing recipes, Magone says she steered clear of any that was clearly not bipartisan. Or so she thought: A call for a cookie that featured Ruth Bader Ginsburg's iconic lace collars drew some nasty comments on Facebook. (She found a baker nevertheless.)

Bakers are tasked with making 10 dozen of each assigned cookie. Magone says some attendees line up really early to fill their boxes, and the tables will have to be constantly refilled so all 30,000 or so treats get their time in the limelight. Leftovers will be donated to local food banks, retirement homes and the Grove City Library. There also will be a raffle whose winner will get to sample all 250 cookies.

Mary Hodges, who is making 12 recipes and then driving 1,440 cookies from her home in West Lafayette, Ind., for next Sunday's event, says all that time in the kitchen allows her to give back to a community that gives others so much. In addition to sharing recipes and baking advice, the group often does cookie fundraisers for community organizations and people in need.

"I'm far away from Pittsburgh, so I can't be there for a lot of things," Hodges says. "This is my hobby. I'm having a ball doing it."

Wooten says this year's Cookie University is drawing bakers from as far away as Iowa and California. (There still are a few tickets left for the afternoon session.) Some, in fact, are giving up family vacations to attend – either because they want to learn something new, have a wedding coming up or just want to meet in person the like-minded folks they've met online. Others are picking up cookies along the way for delivery.

"It's a group that wants you and needs you and shares with you," she says.

A few, Wooten adds with a laugh, don't care about baking at all and just want to eat cookies.

What they all have in common, despite being from different walks of life, is the desire to be part of a community that celebrates one of life's greatest pleasures.

Both easily transportable and a blank canvas for expression – cookies, she says, "just make people smile."

Poor Man Cookies

Makes 3 dozen cookies

This Depression-era cookie, a family favorite from Laura Magone, was designed for affordability, using just 1 egg and shortening instead of butter. If you don't want to use shortening, substitute 1/2 cup of oil or 1/2 cup of whole milk Greek yogurt.

1 cup raisins
1 egg
1 cup sugar
1/2 cup shortening
1 teaspoon vanilla
3 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1/2 teaspoon salt

Put 1 cup of raisins in a pan with enough water to cover. Heat on the stove until it begins to boil. Simmer for 15 minutes, turn off heat, then let the raisins sit for another 15 minutes. They will absorb most of the water in the pan. Let cool.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease a rimmed cookie sheet or jelly roll pan.

Cream egg, sugar, shortening (or substitute) and vanilla in a large bowl. After the mixture is creamed, add 1 cup of cold water.

Sift dry ingredients together three times, then add to the creamed mixture until combined.

Pour cooked, cooled raisins along with any remaining liquid into the combined mixture. Mix all well.

Spread batter into a greased pan, and bake in a 350-degree oven for 25-30 minutes.

Glaze while still hot with 1 cup of powdered sugar mixed with milk to spreading consistency.

Cut in squares when cold.

Laura Magone, Monongahela

Biscotti Regina

Makes 40 cookies

Biscotti Regina (or reginelle) are small, crunchy Sicilian sesame seed cookies, particularly popular in Palermo and often served during Christmas. Known as "queen's biscuits," they feature a distinct nutty, sweet-savory flavor and are typically coated in toasted sesame seeds and flavored with lemon, orange zest or anise.

Frank Sinatra, who started attracting bobby soxers to his concerts in the '40s with songs like "Night and Day," famously loved these cookies, specifically ordering them "a little on the burnt side" from Veniero's Pastry in New York City. He was a regular and often had the crunchy, lemon-scented cookies shipped to his Palm Springs home.

Biscotti Regina were originally made with strutto, or lard, which is often replaced with butter. You also can subsitute lemon zest for orange zest and baking powder for baker's ammonia (ammonium carbonate). For extra nutty flavor, lightly toast the sesame seeds in a dry pan until fragrant.

2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ammonium carbonate or baking powder
1/8 teaspoon salt
1/3 cup unsalted butter, cut into cubes
1 large egg
Zest of 1 orange
4 tablespoons milk
1/2 cup sesame seeds

In a large bowl, stir together all-purpose flour, sugar, ammonium carbonate (or baking powder) and salt.

Add cold cubed butter and use your fingers or a pastry cutter to cut the butter into the flour until the mixture resembles a coarse meal.

Make a well in the center and add egg, orange zest and milk. Stir together to form dough. If the mixture is dry, add 1 extra tablespoon of milk, as needed, to form a slightly tacky dough.

Shape into a ball, flatten into a disc and wrap with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line baking sheets with parchment paper.

Prepare a small bowl filled with water; place sesame seeds in a second bowl.

Divide the dough into 4 equal pieces. Work with one piece of dough at a time, keeping the rest wrapped. Roll into a long rope about the width of your thumb. Cut into 2-inch lengths.

Moisten each cut piece of dough lightly with water with your fingers and roll in sesame seeds to coat all sides.

Place 1 inch apart on prepared baking sheets as they will expand during baking. Continue with remaining dough.

Bake for 22 minutes or until golden brown. Let cool before serving. Store at room temperature in an airtight container for up to 2 weeks or in freezer for up to 3 months.

Melissa Carnack, Missy La La's Biscotti

Canteen Cookie Bars

Makes 3 dozen cookie bars

This recipe is from a 50-page promotional pamphlet put out in 1942 by Spry, a brand of vegetable shortening that was available in the U.S. from 1936 until the 1970s. It was commonly used in baking and cooking, similar to Crisco. It came with instructions on how to pack the cookies in boxes (or empty Spry cans) to mail to soldiers serving in World War II.

I used Crisco and chopped salted cashews. It makes a crispy, chewy cookie.

FOR COOKIE LAYER:
1/2 cup vegetable shortening, plus more for pan
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
1/2 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
1 cup sifted flour
FOR TOPPING:
1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 eggs, beaten
2 tablespoons flour
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1 1/2 cups shredded coconut
1 cup nuts, coarsely cut

Preheat oven to 325 degrees, Grease an 8-by-12-inch pan with shortening.

Combine shortening and salt. Add ½ cup brown sugar and cream well.

Add 1 cup flour and blend.

Spread in prepared pan and bake in slow oven for 20 minutes.

While base is baking, prepare topping. Add 1 cup brown sugar and vanilla to eggs, beating until thick and foamy.

Add 2 tablespoons flour, baking powder, coconut and nuts, and blend. Spread over baked mixture, then return to oven and bake 25 minutes.

Cool and cut in small bars.

Spry Vegetable Shortening booklet, 1942

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Richard A. Brooks / AFP via Getty Images / TNS

A man walks in front of an installation to promote the film "Godzilla Minus One" outside a popular shopping center and official development in the Hibiya area of Tokyo on March 11, 2024.

Too many Godzillas?

By HOWARD CHUA-EOAN
Bloomberg Opinion (TNS)

Though I am a lifelong member of the cult of Godzilla, I am a know-nothing neophyte next to some of my fellow enthusiasts. I'm mesmerized by their YouTube deconstructions of a recent movie trailer starring the classic Japanese monster who first stomped through Tokyo in November 1954. They've calculated the increased size of Godzilla in his next film by scaling the latest incarnation as it strolls along the Statue of Liberty. It's work worthy of medieval theologians counting the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin.

The Lady Liberty moment is from a two-minute preview of "Godzilla Minus Zero." The film is due this November from Japan's Toho Co. Ltd., which released the original creature feature the same year it gave the world Akira Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai." Meanwhile, Godzillogists have also imposed their exacting scrutiny on the teasers for "Godzilla x Kong: Supernova," the next in the Monsterverse series from Burbank, California-based Legendary Pictures. Their quest: Discover the identity of Godzilla's enemy in the movie scheduled for a 2027 release. Could the rival kaiju be the demonic Destroyah? Or SpaceGodzilla, that transmutation of our hero but with crystalline shoulder pads?

As you may have surmised, our fanatical cult is in the middle of a schism of sorts. Over the last decade, there have been two cinematic Godzillas roaming the planet – one based in its native Japan, the other out of America. Last week, Toho announced it was going to manage the bifurcation of its hugely profitable icon – a sprawling piece of intellectual property some estimate to be worth $1 billion or more. Might it result in a bigger muddle?

First, some history. In 2004, Toho's Godzilla movies ground to a creative halt after 28 theatrical releases. Since 1954, Godzilla had evolved from rampaging villain to anti-hero to planetary savior to googly-eyed goofball to box-office poison. The kaiju would not star in another movie until 2014, when Legendary released the critically acclaimed "Godzilla." The U.S. studio (now co-owned by the private equity firm Apollo Global Management Inc.) signed a licensing agreement with Toho for an undisclosed fee to use the monster under strict supervision. The Japanese movie company's caution was borne of experience: A waywardly reengineered 1998 American version of the creature flopped with critics and fans. Legendary teamed Godzilla with super-simian King Kong; its five Monsterverse movies have so far have each grossed hundreds of millions of dollars worldwide. (Likely providing seed funding for Legendary's other hit series, "Dune.")

With global interest rising, Toho produced "Shin Godzilla" (the first word meaning "new") in 2016, reimagining the beast spawned by 21st century ecological disaster and bureaucratic ineptitude. It was Japan's biggest live-action hit that year. In 2023, Toho brought out a terrifying CGI remake of the 1954 original as "Godzilla Minus One." It was a bigger success than "Shin Godzilla" and a box-office smash overseas, too. Both films were praised for their faithfulness to the spirit of the '50s foundation myth of the monster. "Godzilla Minus One" took home the 2024 Oscar for best visual effects, the first Japanese movie to do so, beating out other films with bigger budgets. Hence the "Minus Zero" sequel due later this year.

To keep from clashing over the same audience, Toho and Legendary avoid releasing their respective Godzillas in the same calendar year. But the movies are beginning to bunch up. At the same time, Legendary has a series on Apple TV, now in its second season, featuring both Godzilla and Kong, "Monarch: Legacy of Monsters." To add to the profusion, Toho has cast Godzilla in a number of anime series and short films.

The Japanese studio now declares that all these variants can coexist in what it is calling Godzilla World – something like the Walt Disney Co.-owned Marvel Universe, which ranges from movies to comics to collector's model kits to T-shirts and mugs. The house that Mickey Mouse built is constantly defending its copyrights and has recently gone after AI companies that have generated Marvelverse characters without permission. The Japanese company's announcement is a reminder that while there may be many Godzillas out there, Toho rules them all – and will enforce its IP rights if it has to.

The overlord of this effort is Keiji Ota, who has the official title "chief Godzilla officer." It's a fun way to describe responsibilities that include Toho's anime group, products and licensing, digital content sales as well as IP management and strategy. "It's fine to have different versions of Godzilla," Ota told a Japanese news site, "Various creators are welcome to join in at any point." The key word, I believe, is "join" – with likely fees for the privilege. He foresees new movies, new creatures, new audiences, Godzilla for all ages and for the ages. Also, Godzilla branding everywhere. The kaiju's already on F1 race cars and Lacoste T-shirts.

I'm all for more Godzilla. He's been the central character of more movies than James Bond (closing on 40 compared to fewer than 30). But I'm also worried about dissipating the meaning of the monster. Ota's nearly 40-year career at Toho has focused on anime and, though he's enthusiastic about the Legendary licensing, he's had less of a hand in the acclaimed "Shin Godziilla" and "Minus One" projects. Will Toho's famous kaiju wander away from his roots again? That's beginning to happen as the Legendary movie monsters become more and more cartoonish.

A lot can be said to justify the ways of Godzilla to non-fans, who may find essays about monsters stomping through cities in questionable taste amid turbulent times. But the monster is all too poignantly human.

The original Gojira was galvanized by the March 1954 U.S. hydrogen bomb test in the Bikini Atoll that resulted, among many things, in fallout reaching 23 crewmen of a Japanese fishing vessel anchored 80 miles away. The fishermen would contract or die of cancer. The unfortunate boat's name was the Daigo Fukuryu – Lucky Dragon Number 5. The real-life combination of nuke and dragon allowed director Ishiro Honda to project some of Japan's feelings about Hiroshima and Nagasaki via a radioactive leviathan leveling Tokyo. Godzilla was a way of embodying tragedy – and gaining power over it.

Today's aficionados continue to thrill to kaiju battles – just like the 6-year-old still in me does. But we also revere the deep legacy of the monster. Many have noted the allusion in the "Minus Zero" clip to the Hiroshima dome, the skeletal survivor of the 1945 bombing. Godzilla and his kaiju brethren may act out beastly and primal behavior, but as Rilke said, "All angels are terrifying." If so, it's good to be on the side of the monsters.

This column reflects the personal views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

Howard Chua-Eoan is a columnist for Bloomberg Opinion covering culture and business. He previously served as Bloomberg Opinion's international editor and is a former news director at Time magazine.

MOVIE REVIEW

Warner Bros. Pictures / TNS

From left, Karl Urban as Johnny Cage, Hiroyuki Sanada as Scorpion and Josh Lawson as Kano in "Mortal Kombat II."

'Mortal Kombat II' lacks cheesy charm of previous playthrough

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

'Mortal Kombat II'

★ ½

MPA rating: R (for strong bloody violence and gore, and language)

Running time: 1:56

How to watch: In theaters

Every generation gets the chintzy martial arts flick it deserves. From the Jean-Claude Van Damme movies of the 1980s like "Bloodsport" and "Kickboxer," to the 1995 hit "Mortal Kombat," based on the iconic arcade game, it's a tradition that endures. Even the 2021 "Mortal Kombat" reboot was a surprise hit, so it's no surprise that a sequel with the same creative team has arrived some five years later. Unfortunately, the astonishingly stiff "Mortal Kombat II" simply doesn't have the cheesy charm of the first. Even the iconic theme song, which plays over the end credits, just doesn't have the same oomph.

Director Simon McQuoid has returned for the sequel, with a new screenwriter, Jeremy Slater, penning the script. While the 2021 reboot followed the journey of the new character Cole Young (Lewis Tan) as he's chosen to save the Earthrealm though the fighting tournament, the sequel follows the beloved game character – and in this world, washed-up actor – Johnny Cage (Karl Urban) as he does the same.

The sequel also adds fan favorite character Princess Kitana (Adeline Rudolph) and her deadly blade fans. The story is built around Kitana's childhood trauma of losing her father to the evil Shao Kahn (Martyn Ford), who has taken over her home realm of Edenia, enslaving her mother as his zombie consort, Sindel (Ana Thu Nguyen). Kitana just puts her head down and trains for the tournament, sparring with her bodyguard and friend Jade (Tati Gabrielle).

But that's about it when it comes to story. As we know, there are fighting tournaments that dictate who gets to rule what realm, and Shao Kahn has his sights set on the Earthrealm. It's "high stakes" in that Johnny Cage and his fellow warriors have to "save the world," but we don't get much of an argument for the importance of the Earthrealm except from reanimated Aussie mercenary Kano (Josh Lawson), who extols the virtues of beer, bread baskets and threesomes, a few of the qualities he's finding lacking in the current state of Edenia, which is all rocks, dirt and sad people.

That's the level of nuance you're going to get in "Mortal Kombat II," which is ultimately just a series of increasingly dull and poorly staged fights set against dull computer-generated backgrounds (one weeps for the maximalist production design of Paul W.S. Anderson's original film). It has all the appeal of watching someone else play the video game: Kitana fights Johnny Cage in the empty town square, Sonya (Jessica McNamee) fights Sindel in a spiky dungeon cell, Cole fights Shao Kahn in a drippy green sewer; Liu Kang (Ludi Lin) and Kung Lao (Max Huang) fight on a temple in the middle of a swirly blue galaxy, and on and on.

It's shockingly boring for a "Mortal Kombat" movie, except when McQuoid suddenly drops some seriously intense gore, giving it that over-the-top horror flair and nodding to the heightened video game reality. But along with that surprise digital blood, he also can't quite balance the multiple tones he's juggling, between the super earnest and self-serious characters like Lord Raiden (Tadanobu Asano) and Kitana, with the sarcastic white guys Cage and Kano, who bring the humor and get the best lines. Is this a meta, self-aware campy adaptation or a deeply felt story of family loss and trauma? And why does Cole only get one line about his family, the entire stakes of the first film?

In a video game, it's fine to simply go through the motions, but in a film, we need someone to latch onto, and none of these actors – with the exception of Urban and Lawson – are given much of anything to work with, character-wise. The meta inter-realm quality of Cage's storyline is the best bit, as he's recruited by Sonya and Raiden in the parking garage of a fan convention, but there's not even enough of that. The best fight is easily Cage against Baraka (CJ Bloomfield) in a desert-set Tarkatan village, because it actually seems like a real place with real personality. The emotional core of the story apparently belongs to Kitana, but Cage steals the show, because he's handed a bit of compelling material and Urban gives it the right amount of sass.

The costumes are giving Halloween, the sets and props are giving "Xena: Warrior Princess" and the story and performances aren't giving anything at all. "Mortal Kombat II" seems destined to go the way of the '90s sequel "Mortal Kombat: Annihilation" – directly into obscurity.

MOVIE REVIEW

'The Sheep Detectives' sees Ewe work the clues in odd but fun mystery

By MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

'The Sheep Detectives'

★★★

MPA rating: PG (for thematic material, some violent content and brief language)

Running time: 1:49

How to watch: In theaters

Courtesy of Amazon MGM Studios

Chris O'Dowd voices Mopple, left, and Julia-Louis Dreyfus voices Lily in "The Sheep Detectives."

Believing sheep are the kindest creatures on Earth, English shepherd George provides them with great care, feeding them and giving them medicine and not allowing other men who may do them harm to get their hands on them.

He also reads to them every night. Murder-mystery novels.

George tells himself he knows they can't understand the stories, but he doesn't correctly interpret the sounds they make when he closes a book before finishing it.

They just baaaaa-dly want to know who done it.

And when George is murdered, his animals discover he's given them the tools needed to crack the case.

We meet Hugh Jackman's George – as well as several of his sheep, voiced by well-known actors including Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Bryan Cranston and Patrick Stewart – in the early moments of "The Sheep Detectives," a highly enjoyable family-friendly comedy mystery debuting this week in theaters.

Adapted from German novelist Leonie Swann's 2005 bestseller, "Three Bags Full: A Sheep Detective Story," the odd-but-charming romp is directed by Kyle Balda and penned by Craig Mazin.

George's death is a big deal in the small fictional English village of Denbrook, although the town's lone – and young – police officer, Tim Derry (Nicholas Braun), does not suspect foul play. However, Lily (Louis-Dreyfus), the smartest member of George's flock, believes differently.

With the help of other sheep – primarily the patient Mopple (Chris O'Dowd) and gruff loner Sebastian (Cranston) – Lily endeavors not only to put the pieces together but also to nudge Tim in the right direction from time to time.

Suspects abound for both sheep and human detectives, who count Tim as well as Elliot Matthews (Nicholas Galitzine, "The Idea of You"), a reporter visiting Denbrook with whom the cop reluctantly teams. They include Caleb Merrow (Tosin Cole, "Supacell"), a neighboring shepherd; Ham Gilyard (Conleth Hill, "Game of Thrones"), a butcher who would love to put his knives to George's sheep; Beth Pennock (Hong Chau, "The Whale"), an innkeeper who steals what she believes to be a love letter from George to another woman; Reverend Hillcoate (Kobna Holdbrook-Smith, "Justice League"), a minister with whom George seemingly has feuded; Rebecca Hampstead (Molly Gordon, "Theater Camp"), George's long-lost daughter, who arrives in town around the time of the killing; and Lydia Harbottle (Emma Thompson, "Dead of Winter") a lawyer representing George's far-away but heard-from son.

Lily and, by extension, Tim rely largely on the conventions of the murder-mystery genre to piece together the clues. However, Tim must not let his (entirely obvious) attraction to Rebecca cloud his judgment, while Lily finds reasons to question if she's as smart as she thinks. Sure, she's always known the ending to George's mysteries before he's revealed them, but this is real life and she worries about the ramifications of her being wrong this time.

The production is said to have used a hybrid approach to create this photorealistic animated flock of crime-solving sheep, which also include the proud and dignified Sir Ritchfield (Stewart, "Star Trek: Picard"), the shabby Wool-Eyes (Rhys Darby, "Flight of the Conchords"), the curious Zora (Bella Ramsey, "Catherine Called Birdy"), fluffy diva Cloud (Regina Hall, "Girls Trip") and meathead ram brothers Reggie and Ronnie (both voiced by Brett Goldstein, "Ted Lasso").

Lastly, there's the poor little Winter Lamb (Tommy Birchall), seen as an outsider by the other sheep simply because it wasn't born in spring like the rest of them. This little lamb will, of course, prove its worth.

Known for his work in animation, including as the director or co-director of films such as "The Lorax" (2012) and a few films in the "Despicable Me"/"Minions" universe, Balda confidently steps into the realm of live action. "The Sheep Detectives" has myriad moving pieces, but Balda never lets the story wander off.

He has help juggling all of these characters from skilled writer Mazin, best known for a pair of prestige HBO dramas, the 2019 limited series "Chernobyl" and the ongoing supernatural video game adaptation "The Last of Us." Swimming in these gentler waters, he keeps things both structurally sound and fun.

Speaking of fun, it's a treat to hear "Seinfeld" staple Louis-Dreyfus and Cranston ("Breaking Bad"), who recurred on "Seinfeld" as colorful dentist Tim Whatley, share the screen again but in a decidedly different manner. O'Dowd ("Bridesmaids," "The Sapphires") brings a lot to the mix with his performance as the easy-going and wise Mopple.

And while Jackman ("The Prestige," "The Greatest Showman") is the movie's biggest star and gets top billing, he really isn't around for much of it. When it comes to two-legged characters, "The Sheep Detectives" mostly is a showcase for Braun, who's essentially doing a more sympathetic spin on his entertainingly dopey "Succession" character, Cousin Greg. (You kinda hope he gets the girl, even as you have reason to wonder if Rebecca may, in fact, have offed her pops.)

While it likely falls short of a movie the family will watch for years to come, we wouldn't pull the wool over your eyes – "The Sheep Detectives" is worth gathering your flock to see at least once.

BOOKS

As 'Soccer Dad' can tell you, today's youth sports are no simple fun and games

By RICK KOGAN
Chicago Tribune (TNS)

ABOVE: Cristie Bosch unfurls a book cover promotional poster for "Soccer Dad," written by her husband, David Murray, left, at their home on April 9 in Chicago. Murray's book is about navigating competitive youth sports through their daughter Scout's soccer experiences, having played competitively from childhood through college. **LEFT:** A framed picture of David Murray, Cristie Bosch, and their daughter, Scout, sits on a kitchen counter.

Photos by John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune / TNS

If memory serves, when I was starting on organized high school sports teams, my father saw me play football once, basketball twice and baseball not at all. An otherwise attentive and supportive father, he was like most fathers and mothers of his generation, not at all preoccupied with the games the children played.

Times change and David Murray knows that better than most. "I grew up playing sports in my blue jeans," he tells me. "Just fun, no parental pressures."

The youth sports world is now a wild, emotionally jittery and expensive realm.

The proof of that is spread across 180-some pages of his enjoyable, enlightening and charming new book, "Soccer Dad" (Disruption Books), about the journey that Murray and his wife, art teacher Cristie Bosch, took with their daughter Scout.

He writes, "As a soccer family, you aren't chasing a dream as much as you're dead asleep, smack in the middle of one – an epic dream, where literally anything could happen next."

It began very early on, very early. "She was 3 when she got her first pair of soccer 'cleeks,' as she pronounced them, and started scuffing the ball around on the turfed floor of a Chicago warehouse in a program for tots, called 'Lil' Kickers,'" Murray writes.

The mother of another little girl who was watching the kids kick a soccer ball around said to Murray, "Your daughter is pretty good," and thus began, as Murray says, "a mad journey that is modern youth sports."

It is a mad trip but also an enjoyable one, into "the byzantine levels of youth soccer in the city and suburbs."

And, though the father is the central character in the book, he writes, "Ultimately, how we performed as soccer parents is probably just a measure of how we performed as parents. However well or poorly we did at both, Scout's mom and I did this together, and I dedicate this book to her."

There are revelations aplenty, shocks too, and dozens of motel breakfasts, all in search of the holy grail, which, in most cases, is represented by a full scholarship to a Division 1 college or university.

Scout was good, too, and it was not just her parents who would tell you. By the time she was a junior at Lane Tech College Prep, she was wowing people. One of them was reporter/writer Pat McGavin at ChicagolandSoccer.org, which, by the way, will also give you a good glimpse of the local high school soccer scene.

McGavin wrote, "In about six minutes of game action, Murray turned a marquee showdown between two ranked city powers into a one-note affair …(staking) her claim to elite status by scoring three goals during her torrid stretch of the … 3-0 victory."

Though her parents told Scout that they had saved for her college tuition, trying to remove the pressure of a scholarship off her shoulders, she snagged one anyway at Ohio University, Division 1.

Whew, and her folks could assume their hard work was over. "Now Scout's mom and I could lean back and relax in the easy-smiling, canvas-chair-toting, school swag-wearing, serenely self-satisfied college soccer parents we remembered imagining we would be," Murray writes.

No such luck. As Murray tells me, "College was the hardest part, lots of pressure, and the girls calling their moms and dads after every game."

Murray did not decide to write this book until the soccer journey was near its end. And in it he writes, proudly, that Scout read it in manuscript form. She requested "remarkably few" changes and finally said, "Thanks for writing it, Dad."

It was formally published April 14, with a cover line of praise from Jonathan Eig, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "King: A Life" and also fine books about other one-name giants such as Ali, Gehrig and Capone: "Wise and funny and wonderful in every way."

He is right. Murray is a fine writer, a clear thinker and a good dad. He moved here from his native Ohio many years ago and wrote a few stories for the Tribune. He has written for other publications and written a few books; the one before this was 2021's vastly different "An Effort to Understand: Hearing One Another (and Ourselves) in a Nation Cracked in Half." He is editor and publisher of Vital Speeches of the Day, a venerable magazine, and is the founder and executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association. He writes daily on communication matters at Writing-Boots.com, which is where Scout has made frequent appearances.

He writes that this book is not a "how to be a soccer parent" manual. And though he does offer an advice-packed last chapter, he admits, "I don't know how you should go about this. Every parent is different, every kid is different, every family is different, and every dream, if it truly comes from within the heart of the child who's chasing it, is unique."

Scout is graduating from college now and will then be back here to attend Roosevelt University, working toward a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling with her aim to be a marriage and family therapist. She will live in student housing and not in her parents' Ukrainian Village home. She's a big girl now.

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, April 25, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. Yesteryear. Caro Claire Burke. Knopf
2. Purple State. Dana Perino. Harper
3. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
4. Hope Rises. David Baldacci. Grand Central
5. A Woman's Place. Danielle Steel. Delacorte
6. Starside (deluxe ed.). Alex Aster. Avon
7. Paradox. Preston/Preston. Forge
8. The Mother-Daughter Book Club. Patterson/Patterson. Little, Brown
9. The Night We Met (deluxe ed.). Abby Jimenez. Forever
10. Rites of the Starling. Devney Perry. Red Tower

Hardcover nonfiction

1. Strangers. Belle Burden. Dial
2. The Well-Educated Child. Deborah Kenny. Get Lifted
3. Start with Yourself. Emma Grede. Avid Reader
4. Come Eat. Melissa Ben-Ishay. Harper Influence
5. Famesick. Lena Dunham. Random House
6. Maintain. Susan Peirce Thompson. Hay House
7. London Falling. Patrick Radden Keefe. Doubleday
8. Capable. Goff/Thomas. Bethany House
9. Through Mom's Eyes. Sheinelle Jones. Putnam
10. How to Start. Jodi Kantor. Little, Brown

Trade paperback

1. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
2. The Jesus Discoveries. Jeremiah J. Johnston. Bethany House
3. Game On. Navessa Allen. Slowburn
4. Dungeon Crawler Carl. Matt Dinniman. Ace
5. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco
6. Dear Debbie. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
7. Frozen by Stardust. Elizabeth Helen. Bloom
8. Want to Know a Secret? Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
9. Project Hail Mary (media tie-in). Andy Weir. Ballantine
10. My Dress-Up Darling, Vol. 15. Shinichi Fukuda. Square Enix Manga

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

Not Bond or Bourne, Michael Idov's insecure millennial spy is a modern hero

By ERIK PEDERSEN
The Orange County Register (TNS)

Michael Idov is the author of the spy thrillers "The Collaborators" and this year's "The Cormorant Hunt," which are part of a trilogy. A Latvian-born American raised in Riga, Idov is the author of the novel "Ground Up" and the memoir "Dressed up for a Riot." He won three National Magazine Awards for his work at New York magazine, and he was the editor-in-chief of GQ Russia from 2012 to 2014.

Along with his screenwriting partner and wife Lily, he's written for film and TV projects, including "Deutschland 83" and "Leto," and he directed the 2019 film "The Humorist." Dividing his time between Los Angeles, Berlin, and Portugal, he took the Q&A via email.

Q: Please tell readers about your Ari Falk thrillers, "The Collaborators" and "The Cormorant Hunt."

A: When "The Collaborators" came out in 2024, one reviewer said it better than I myself could: that it "splits the difference between the British and U.S. schools of spy fiction." I think that's exactly right. As a reader, I've always looked for smart, realistic thrillers that would also leave room for some adventure: after all, there's plenty of adventure in real life. (Arguably more than we need at the moment). These novels are my attempt to fill that void.

Ari Falk is not a superspy like Bond or Bourne, or a modern-day Sherlock Holmes like George Smiley. He's a burned-out, insecure millennial who is trying to do some good, and is frankly unsure that working for the U.S. government is the best way to do it. Over the first two books of this trilogy, you see him slowly shift to a worldview some might even consider unpatriotic. He just doesn't want innocent people hurt, even for a great cause.

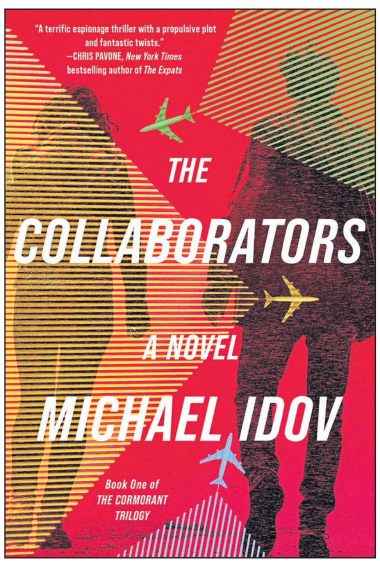
Q: What are some of the challenges of writing a spy thriller when the technology moves so fast – and so do current events?

A: You're right that the geopolitical "now" is almost impossible to capture. I'm slightly cheating by setting every novel two years in the past: "The Collaborators" takes place in 2021, that weird moment between the COVID lockdowns and the war in Ukraine, and "The Cormorant Hunt" ends before Trump's reelection (and addresses some of the factors that led to it).

As for the technology, this is the fun part, at least for me. These books are as much about OSINT, "open-source intelligence," as they are about traditional spycraft. "The Collaborators" is in many ways a love letter to crowdsourced investigative projects like Bellingcat. I also try to show how all sides weaponize things like social media, the crypto market, and influencer culture. In the end, however, everything still comes down to human nature: love, greed, vanity, fear. This never changes.

Q: It seems challenging not only to create a distinct spy character, but also to find space within a thriller to let us get to know the character. Can you talk about how you came up with Ari Falk?

A: A lot of spy fiction takes place in a kind of all-clandestine universe where nothing but espionage exists, and everything else is a backdrop: hotels, airports, etc. It felt important to me to push against this. That's why every setting in these books is a place where I've lived.


"A terrific espionage thriller with a propulsive plot and fantastic twists."
—CHRIS PAVONE, New York Times bestselling author of The Expats
THE COLLABORATORS
A NOVEL
MICHAEL IDOV
Book One of THE CORMORANT TRILOGY

Simon & Schuster / TNS

Ari Falk, too, is a regular 35-year-old who lives in the same world we all do. The first time we meet him, he is playing a dumb game on his phone and stressing out about being underdressed in a fancy hotel bar (he is wearing a Weezer T-shirt). In this sense, he is like a lot of people I know in the intelligence community: "half meathead, half egghead," as he himself says. There's some of me in there – he even has my tennis injury – but not too much.

Q: You've worked in TV on shows like "Deutschland 83" and other series. How did that prepare you for writing fast-paced thrillers?

A: Screenwriting certainly helps you plan things out. But once all the diagramming is done, it's important to keep that part of your brain shut off when you're writing a book. If you don't, it might stop you from using your full toolkit as an author. (For instance, I write in close third person, switching perspectives as needed, so I'm always in one character's head). A novel needs to want to be a novel. Otherwise, you're just writing underlying IP for a future adaptation. Might as well skip the middleman and make it a script.

Q: Is there a book or books you always recommend to other readers?

A: Whenever I run into someone who thinks that spy fiction is all shootouts, agency acronyms, and bad prose, I always pull out two ace cards. One is John le Carre's "A Perfect Spy," the novel JLC himself considered his best. The other is Ian McEwan's "Sweet Tooth," with its rule-breaking Nabokovian twist I wouldn't dream of spoiling here.

Q: What are you reading now?

A: The new George Saunders, "Vigil." And I managed to get "Project Hail Mary" right under the wire before the movie came out. (I'm a very occasional and picky sci-fi reader, but I do have my favorites: James S. A. Corey, Ted Chiang).

Q: How do you decide what to read next?

A: A couple of years ago, I did something I never thought I would: joined a friend's book club. This goes more or less completely against my personality, but it is really getting me to read some stuff I normally wouldn't.

Q: Do you remember the first book that made an impact on you?

A: Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita." I read it far too early, at eleven or twelve, and it stuck with me like a private nightmare of sorts.

Q: Is there a book or type of book you're reluctant to read?

A: A few! I will never read anything AI touched. This is a modern phenomenon, but if the author describes their book using "tropes" as if listing ingredients, I won't come within a mile of it. Most MFA autofiction written by clever children of privilege sets my teeth on edge, though there are exceptions, of course. Finally, no plot is worth wading through bad prose. I recently stopped reading an acclaimed novel a few pages in, because the author didn't know that "disinterested" means "unbiased," not "bored."

Q: Can you recall a book that felt like it was written with you in mind?

A: Percival Everett's "Erasure," which is funny because it stems from an experience that has nothing to do with mine. But as someone who had always refused to stay within a prescribed identity (which, in my case, means writing "immigrant fiction" and monetizing the fact that English is my second language), I found the quiet rage at its core extremely relatable.

Q: Do you have a favorite bookstore or bookstore experience?

A: Quite a few! Ocelot in Berlin. Heywood Hill in London. Counterpoint Records & Books, Skylight Books, and Book Soup in LA. Oh, and Godmothers in Summerland is an almost surreally perfect place.

Q: What's something about your book that no one knows?

A: Pay attention to the character of Alan Keegan and his taste in music. Every time he listens to something, I get to smuggle in one of my favorite songs.

AUTOMOTIVE

AUTO REVIEWS

Swank GMC Acadia Denali is a couple cylinders short of luxury

By HENRY PAYNE
The Detroit News (TNS)

With the I-94 interchange underwater, I exited Detroit Metro Airport and waded through the flood waters in my 2026 GMC Acadia Denalia. With a GMC truck-like 7.3 inches of ground clearance and all-wheel drive, the big three-ton, three-row ute shrugged off the hazard while smaller cars turned around.

After churning through the Strait of Romulus unscathed, I scaled the on-ramp to I-94 East. Before activating hands-free Super Cruise for my ride into Detroit, I floored the throttle to merge into traffic. GROOOOOAN! droned the four-cylinder engine with a compact car-like note that sounded like the small sedans I had left behind.

The handsome, high-tech, roomy, rugged Acadia is a welcome injection of luxurious GMC cred into the three-row SUV segment, but for one flaw.

It lacks a V-6 or V-8 engine that GMC cred demands.

GMC has become a sales juggernaut in a portfolio hampered by upscale Cadillac and Buick premium brands that carry a lot of baggage.

In the three-row SUV space, Cadillac has put the gas-fired XT6 out to pasture, leaving the Vistiq EV as the brand's only choice in this space.

"I don't think I'm ready for an electric car," said my friend Ron, a longtime Cadillac owner.

"I don't think I'm a Buick customer," said pal Sarah of GM's premium brand that produces terrific SUVs these days – but is still dogged by generations of geriatric sedans. Buick's three-row, gas-powered SUV? The Enclave. "Um, no," said my friend.

There are scores of buyers like these. Enter GMC.

"Oh, I like the looks of this," said Ron, circling the Acadia Denali with its bold GMC grille and 21-inch chrome wheels. Key to GMC's explosive growth has been its embrace of halo vehicles like the $82K, three-row Yukon Denali Ultimate mega-ute and $100K Hummer EV.

Everyone knows the crab-walkin', head turnin', 0-60 mph-blitzin' Hummer EV – and its legend rubs off on next of kin.

Acadia is luxurious, adventurous and different-looking than German Audi/BMW/Mercs in class. I like the AT4 trim even more for its rugged vibe – plus it has another half-inch of ground clearance and all-terrain tires to get around Metro Detroit obstacles like potholes and, um, floods.

Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

The bold visuals continue inside, where the Acadia features a nicely appointed cabin that echoes big-brother, truck-based Yukon with yuuuuge twin digital screens: an 11-inch instrument and 15-inch vertical infotainment screen anchored by a fat volume knob (shades of Ford Mustang Mach-E). Readers of this column know that I hold GM ergonomics in high regard, and that volume knob is the appetizer to a first-class cabin that's easy to negotiate.

I flicked down the GM's ubiquitous, Tesla-like electronic column shifter (no muscle necessary like the ol' truck-like column shifters) to get underway. The column shifter opens up acres of console space, including a standard wireless charger so your phone won't run out of juice while navigating standard Android Auto/Apple CarPlay Google Maps.

"Hey, Google," I barked, feeling peckish for an egg-and-sausage biscuit. "Find Chick-fil-A."

The screen filled with options.

"The first one," I said without my hands ever leaving the wheel. We were off to Southfield.

The ergonomic excellence continues on the steering wheel, where I could, without taking my eyes off the wheel, adjust adaptive cruise control with a rocker switch. Radio volume/dial controls on the back of the wheel also meant I need not divert my eyeballs from my driving duties.

My top-trim Denali tester also optioned a camera mirror, head-up display and panoramic roof.

All this attention to detail makes it even more puzzling why GMC doesn't option a V-6 or V-8 engine synonymous with its tough-truck legacy. The Sierra, for example, options two V-8 engines and a diesel inline-6. So do European luxury brands. So do premium brands like Mazda XC-90 (turbo inline-6) and Kia Telluride/Hyundai Palisade SUVs. Dodge Durango sales jumped 50 percent when a V-8 was added alongside the three-row ute's V-6.

I tested a three-row Honda Pilot Trailsport alongside Acadia as Honda leans into off-road adventure pioneered by American brands like ... GMC.

"BRAWWWWR!" went the Honda when I put my foot in it

"GROOOOOAN!" shouted Acadia. Sigh.

Yes, yes, the Acadia's turbo-4 is a torque monster with 326 pound-feet compared to the Honda's 262. GM engineers are mighty. But the Honda matches the Acadia's 5,000-pound towing capacity, while the Honda is simply more satisfying to drive hard thanks to its throaty V-6. Emotion is a big part of luxury.

Perhaps as important, a V-6/V-8 option would better separate Acadia from its Chevy Traverse brother – The Detroit News' 2024 Vehicle of the Year. For $5K less, Traverse is loaded with the same features (even Super Cruise optioned) while boasting one of the best Chevy designs in recent years.

GM knows its hands-free Super Cruise is a game-changer, and it's offered even on the wee, $32K Chevy Bolt.

Hit the road in the family-friendly Acadia, and Super Cruise makes long trips less exhausting (only Ford's BlueCruise comes close in class). With the shouty turbo-4 up to speed on I-94, I activated Super Cruise, the steering wheel turned green, and I relaxed hands-free while the big ute drove (including lane changes when we encountered slower traffic) and Google Maps navigated shotgun. Destination: Chick-fil-A

Were I traveling to see family in, say, northern Michigan, Kentucky or West Virginia, I would have enjoyed my Chick-fil-A egg-and-sausage biscuit while Super Cruise drove. With the Denali Ultimate's 500-mile range, I would also have been able to make the trip to Traverse City and back without stopping to fill up. The electric Cadillac Vistiq? At least two lengthy stops.

But on this day, I was on Detroit News deadline. Thank goodness Acadia is also a rolling office.

I picked up my breakfast, found a parking spot, then pulled the second-row seat lever. THONK! The seat collapsed flat into an ottoman. I plugged in my computer to the three-prong, 120-volt outlet, and climbed into the back seat.

I stashed my drink 'n' sandwich into twin third-row cubbies, swung my legs onto the ottoman and worked on my laptop as if I were in my home office. Rear-seat climate controls kept the cool April temps at bay while the huge panoramic roof let in sunlight.

(My office does not have a panoramic roof.)

That's luxury GMC Denali Ultimate style for $67,290 compared to a comparable $88,690 Audi Q7 Prestige. Heck, with the money I save, I could get an aftermarket V-6 and stuff it up front.

2026 GMC Acadia

★★★

Vehicle type: Front- and all-wheel-drive, six-passenger SUV

Price: $45,795, including $1,995 destination charge ($67,290 Denali Ultimate as tested)

Powerplant: Turbocharged, 2.5-liter, inline-4 cylinder

Power: 328 horsepower, 326 pound-feet of torque

Transmission: Eight-speed automatic

Performance: 0-60 mph, 6.5 seconds (Car and Driver est.); towing, 5,000 pounds

Weight: 4,950 pounds est. (as tested)

Fuel economy: EPA 20 mpg city/27 highway/23 combined (FWD); EPA 19 mpg city/24 highway/21 combined (AWD)

Report card

Highs: Bold, premium looks; superior interior ergonomics

Lows: Shy engine note; V-6 or V-8 option, please

This is one hybrid that makes no sense whatsoever and it's glorious

By LARRY PRINTZ
Tribune News Service (TNS)

If you are the type who looks at hybrids the way you look at kombucha (suspiciously, with the faint hope that someone will admit it tastes like fermented sadness), you're in for a rude awakening. The 2026 Chevrolet Corvette E-Ray hybrid is a slap in the face to everything your sensible mind holds dear.

For it will rip your face off faster than just about anything else on the road.

This monster pairs Chevrolet's 6.2-liter overhead-valve V8 with a front mounted electric motor, dialing up 60 mph in 2.5 seconds. That's quicker than the notably more expensive, more powerful Corvette Z06.

Don't try to rationalize that. You can't. But if you're the sort of person who thinks hybrids are for people who count every penny and dream of tax rebates, then this car will personally humiliate you in front of your eco-friendly friends. The E-Ray can assuage your environmental guilt, yet simultaneously humiliate the Z06, leaving its owners muttering about tradition while reaching for a defibrillator. It's one very expensive, very compelling package.

In case you missed it, the E-Ray isn't some brand-new unicorn. It's been gracing roads for a couple of years, which means it's due for a bit of a spa visit. The reconfigurable digital instrument cluster now measures a healthy 14 inches, while the row of buttons that used to parade themselves along the center console have been demoted to a panel below the newly enlarged 12.7-inch infotainment touchscreen. In their place is a grab handle. The engineers at Chevrolet, in their infinite wisdom, have also redesigned the drive-mode selector to make room for a wireless smartphone-charging pad (because while you're hurtling toward 60 mph in 2.5 seconds, the ability to keep your Instagram alive is so crucial).

Naturally, the E-Ray comes fully equipped to keep you tethered to the digital world you can't seem to escape. There's a Google-based user interface, standard Bluetooth, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, and a Wi-Fi hotspot. Because nothing complements 655 horsepower like watching a cat video. And if that is not enough, the E-Ray now comes with a Performance app with acceleration timers, a g-force gauge, tire-pressure and temperature monitors, and a propulsion-system vitals display. In other words, you can obsess over every minute detail of your car's mechanical life while simultaneously ignoring the impending collapse of the planet.

Offered as a coupe with a Targa roof or a convertible with a power-folding hardtop, the E-ray comes with a 160-hp electric motor on the front axle driving the front wheels and powered by a 1.1-kWh battery pack. When paired with the V8, it produces 655 horsepower and 595 pound-feet of torque through an 8-speed dual-clutch transmission. The addition of electrification brings an added benefit: all-wheel drive, the first Corvette so blessed. All-season tires come standard, although summer tires are available.

As you'd expect, there's gobs of power and lightning-quick shifts, the kind that arrive before your brain has finished filing the paperwork. It's compelling, intoxicating and frighteningly capable. On your favorite two-lane road it doesn't merely meet expectations. Cornering grip? It's not good. It's not excellent. It's the sort of grip usually associated with industrial adhesives or small animals clinging to glass skyscrapers. It dispatches every corner, straight, and bad decision with casual authority. Yes, on paper, the E-Ray is heavier because someone stuffed it full of batteries and electric motors. The scales notice. Accountants notice. Fanboys notice. But behind the wheel? Absolutely not. The weight simply evaporates.

On a twisty road, it attacks corners like it's deeply offended by them. You turn in expecting compromise, and instead it just grips harder, faster, angrier, as if the road personally insulted its mother. Physics is dragged into a dark alley and bludgeoned with a torque wrench.

And here's the amazing part: When you're done behaving like a lunatic, you can just drive it normally. Like a car. It's as easygoing as the Stingray, perfectly happy crawling through traffic or sitting politely while you wonder how something so ferocious can also be so utterly reasonable. Any lingering disrespect this nameplate once inspired is quietly, thoroughly erased, preferably in a blur of speed and self-reflection.

The 2026 Chevrolet Corvette E-Ray is deranged. It's gloriously intoxicating and gratifying. And it proves, once again, that the best cars are the ones that make no sense whatsoever.

Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.

2026 Chevrolet Corvette E-Ray

Base price: $108,600

Powertrain: 6.2-liter OHV V8 and front electric motor

Horsepower/Torque: 655/595 pound-feet

EPA rating (combined city/highway): 19 mpg

Fuel required: Premium

Length/Width/Height: 185/80/49 inches

Ground clearance: 5.3 inches

Payload: Not rated

Cargo capacity: 12.5 cubic feet (front and rear)

Jim Fets / Chevrolet / TNS

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

All-in-one Apple charging station is good for travel and home

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

For those entrenched in the Apple ecosystem, Anker's latest all-in-one wireless charging station, the Qi2 25-watt palm-sized **3-in-1 wireless charger with Active Cooling**, is the one you need for use at home, work or anywhere.

It might seem odd to be excited about a charger, but if you're like me, carrying around endless cables with backups, different lengths, etc., is cumbersome. With the compact Anker charger, you can charge an iPhone, AirPods and an Apple Watch simultaneously. Aside from the charging features, you'll love that when it's not in use, and you're on the go, it has a super compact, travel-friendly footprint, folding up to the size of a deck of cards.

The silent airflow cooling system ensures a consistent and safe charge, reducing heat buildup and limiting thermal throttling. A micro fan keeps the phone's temperature under 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit during charging, which helps maintain long-term battery health.

And while it's promoted as the ideal charger with premium build quality for traveling, which I agree with, it's far from limited to that. Think of it as a perfect solution for anywhere: on your desk, nightstand or to clean up cable clutter on your kitchen counter.

According to Anker, the $149.99 charger features an industry-leading Qi2 25-watt fast charge. For iPhone charging it features a front-side MagSafe charger, enabling MagSafe-compatible iPhones (12 or newer) and other MagSafe-enabled devices to charge while also working as a hands-free device in landscape or portrait modes.

A wireless Apple Watch puck sits behind, and the same for AirPods on the bottom. A total of 25 watts of power is supplied when plugged in via USB-C, and then it's distributed to the devices. You can angle the charger up to 60 degrees, and the high-quality hardware has been tested by Anker to withstand more than 10,000 folds.

https://www.anker.com/products/a25n1-anker-prime-qi2-25w-foldable-3-in-1-wireless-charger

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Anker's **Nano 5-in-1**, 20-watt travel adapter is another new charging solution hitting the shelves just in time for summer travel. It's ready to go and charge your devices anywhere with its built-in universal plug compatibility.

The 5-in-1 features include connecting and charging up to five devices simultaneously, with two USB-A and USB-C ports and a standard AC outlet. These are all packed into a pocket-sized device (3.39 by 1.97 by 0.98 inches/3.77 ounces). It's built with safety guards, including a 2-pin to 2-pin connection, which prevents electric shocks.

The Nano 5-in-1 AC-powered charger ($25.99) features retractable AC prongs that slide in or out with the press of a button. Once they are out, plug it in for power and retract them when it's not in use.

https://www.anker.com/products/a9215

Soundcore, an Anker brand, has launched a palm-sized sound machine with the 15-watt **Boom Go 3i Bluetooth speaker** ($59.99). Along with crisp, clear sound, it features a light system with multiple dynamic modes synced to your tunes.

The portability is easy to see with its 4.1-by-1.8-by 4.0-inch size and the 2-in-1 mount strap, which enables it to attach to a belt, bike or backpack in seconds. Inside is a 15-watt speaker outputting up to 92 dB of peak sound. Add BassUp 2.0 technology to deliver a big boom-boom sound with incredible clarity from the compact speaker.

Depending on the settings, the built-in 4,800 mAh rechargeable battery can supply up to 24 hours of playtime at 50 percent volume with the lights off. Even at full volume and the lights on, you' ll get a solid six hours of playtime. If your smartphone needs a power boost, the Boom Go 3i can serve as a portable power bank.

It has an IP68 waterproof and dustproof rating and can withstand drops of up to 3.28 feet. It's available in four colors: black, beige, blue, and pink.

https://www.soundcore.com/products/d5103-boom-go-3i-portable-speaker-for-powerful-sound

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

75% Charged
ANKER
PRIME

The Anker Wireless Charging station features a Qi2 25-watt fast charge.
Anker / TNS

ANKER
UK CA
FC

The Anker 20W Nano Travel includes connecting and charging up to five devices simultaneously.
Anker / TNS

The Soundcore Boom Go 3i has a built-in 4,800 mAh rechargeable battery can supply up to 24 hours of playtime at 50 percent volume with the lights off.
Soundcore / TNS

Big hands, tiny keyboard, bad typing

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

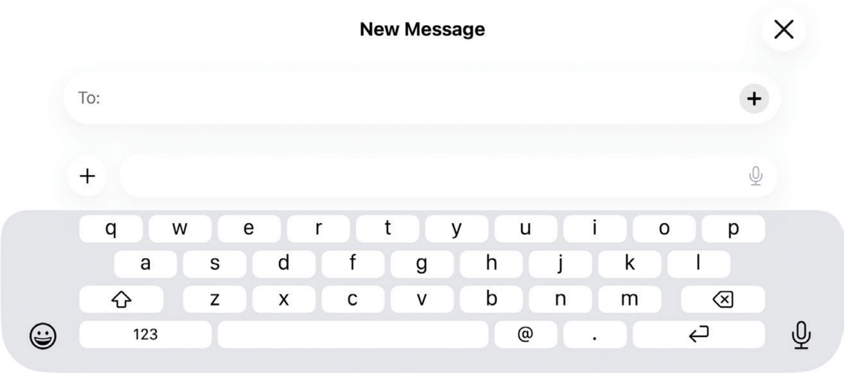
Question: I am a 72-year-old man with giant-sized hands that took a beating during more than 30 years of playing football. I can type on my desktop PC's full-size keyboard with reasonable accuracy but forget about me trying to type on a laptop or a smartphone.

I gave up cell phones in June 1997 (a Motorola flip phone – remember those?) and have been blissfully free of the darn things since then.

I regard them as electronic leashes and I am fully aware of the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans are completely addicted to them. But more and more services these days seem to be tied to smartphone usage.

Everything from concert tickets to parking meters to QR codes that must be scanned in order to obtain the product or service.

I continue to refuse to allow my wife to stick a cell phone in my hand. (She cannot live without her iPhone.) What is your advice to the few of us left who want to continue to live without being glued to a device they simply cannot feasibly operate due to having massive hands (and no interest to do so)?"



Jim Rossman / TNS
The iPhone keyboard expands to take up the entire screen when you rotate the phone horizontally to type.

Answer: Great question.

Only you can decide if the things you might be missing out on are worth carrying a cell phone for.

My advice would be that you need a phone, especially as you age, as a means of calling for help, if nothing else.

You mention digital event tickets and paying for parking as services you're missing out on. I'd also add things like access to navigation apps and medical portals as being pretty useful.

Being out in the world, you may find yourself with car trouble or even medical issues that require assistance. Looking up maps or driving directions or even what time a particular restaurant closes can be very helpful.

I'll also add that a cell phone can let your spouse or your kids know where you are. My wife and I are able to see each other's location through the "Find My" app, and it is very handy. I get that not everyone will want their location tracked, but as we get older, our priorities shift.

So, what's my advice for big hands and tiny keyboards?

Get a phone with as big a screen as possible. There are multiple ways to enter text. You can turn the phone horizontally and the keyboard will magically get wider. You can also use a stylus to tap out your keyboard input. And you can use dictation in pretty much every field you need to enter text.

My iPhone has a small microphone icon at the bottom of the screen whenever the onscreen keyboard is visible. Touching the microphone puts the phone in dictation mode, and the words I speak will appear as typed text. This works for words and even when you need to spell out a specific word or name.

Android keyboards have this feature as well. Android phones also have a keyboard size adjustment to make the keys slightly larger.

I understand that for some people NOT having a cell phone is a kind of badge of honor, but I suggest getting a phone and setting It up for occasional use. Be the guy who only grabs the phone when he's leaving the house and take a stylus along in case you need to pay the parking meter.

Oh, and while we are on the topic, I'll also suggest you don't pay AT&T or Verizon or T-Mobile full price for service.

I pay less than $20 per month for unlimited service on Verizon's network. I'll talk about that next week.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.

Your local storm forecast is likely based on weather miles away – *we're trying to bring it closer to home*

By CHRIS VAGASKY
University of Wisconsin-Madison (The Conversation)

Whether you're planning a weekend hike, deciding what to wear to work or preparing your home for severe storms, the weather forecast is essential. You might instinctively grab your smartphone and check an app for an instant weather update.

But how many times have you looked at your app, only to step outside and see the sky painting a different picture than what's on your screen?

As a meteorologist who operates a weather station network in Wisconsin, I've heard many of the same cliches time and again: "The weatherman is always wrong!" "Just wait five minutes and the weather will be different!"

Before you blame the local forecasters, let's talk about where the data in your weather app comes from, and why it might not always show what you expect. It's why my colleagues and I are working to bring forecast data closer to home.

The nuts and bolts of weather forecasting

Earth is huge. It has a diameter of 7,926 miles at the equator and has 62 miles of atmosphere overhead.

If you want a perfect weather forecast, you will have to precisely measure every molecule of the atmosphere, land and water, and perfectly predict how they will interact with each other for the next minute, day or week. This is, of course, physically impossible.

Instead, scientists run computer models. These models take the observations we do have and simulate the weather on a large scale to a remarkable degree of accuracy. In fact, storm track forecasts from the National Hurricane Center were among its best ever in 2025, and forecasts using machine learning are starting to improve those forecasts even further.

These models are hungry for data. Supercomputers ingest measurements from satellites, weather balloons, Doppler radar, lightning detection networks, buoys, surface weather stations and other measurement platforms to solve the equations that provide weather predictions.

When you open your phone, your weather app isn't doing the meteorology – it's just showing the output of the model's calculations. Even though they generally aren't tailored by a local meteorologist, these short-term forecasts are usually pretty good. But they could be better.

All weather is local

You've probably seen it before: It's raining on one side of the street and not on the other. You flip on the news to see the nearest airport received an inch of rain, but your garden is dry.

There are more than 2,500 airports in the United States with weather stations, which is where much of the weather data shared on TV and online is collected. But for many people, the closest airport is more than 20 miles away. This is especially true in rural areas.

Because of the chaotic nature of weather, the only way to truly know what's happening in your yard is to measure the weather in your yard. But not everyone is interested in installing a rain gauge or personal weather station.

Filling the gaps

To bridge this gap, manystates and universities have established local weather station networks called mesonets – short for mesoscale networks, meaning intermediate scale. These weather stations are installed in locations to ensure everyone in the state is within 20 miles of the nearest station.

Nationally, there are nearly 3,000 mesonet stations installed in 38 states, with morenetworks planned.

Like the weather stations at airports, mesonets measure things like air temperature and relative humidity, air pressure, rainfall or melted snow, and wind speed and direction – often every five minutes.

Many mesonets collect additional data such as soil moisture levels to help farmers. Some even have camera images updated every five minutes to show current weather conditions. Mesonet data is then shared through websites or direct data transmission so that the public, weather forecasters and researchers can easily access it.

I lead the team at Wisconet, a new mesonet that just finished installing 78 weather stations across Wisconsin. Our stations are installed on 10-foot-tall tripods in open areas near orchards and cranberry marshes, farms and airfields, schools and other educational centers, and on city, state and federally owned lands.

These added weather stations are already proving useful. On Aug. 18, 2025, slow-moving thunderstorms moved over a Wisconet station, with more than 3 inches of rain falling in just a couple of hours. The National Weather Service was able to issue a flash flood warning for the area because of the data provided by that station.

In addition to providing a near-real-time snapshot of the local weather, mesonets help farmers decide when to run irrigation systems, spray pesticides or plant crops. They also help provide better weather warnings, particularly when tornadoes and other storms intensify over small areas that farther-away weather stations would miss.

A nationwide network of networks

Because of the immense value of high-frequency weather and soil measurements, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration leads a National Mesonet Program. The program collects weather data from public, private and academic sources, validates the quality of the data, and ensures it flows to users, including the National Weather Service. National Weather Service forecasters use that data to make more timely and accurate severe weather warnings.

Congress is considering expanding that program, with legislation proposed in the House and the Senate. The bills aim to authorize $50 million to $70 million annually to the National Mesonet Program between 2026 and 2030 to improve and expand mesonets across the country. An expansion would mean more weather stations and new capabilities, like real-time snowfall, fire weather and air quality measurements, closer to the people who rely on them.

So the next time you check your smartphone and grumble because the app doesn't match the weather in your backyard, remember that all weather is local. If you don't have a nearby mesonet station, the nearest measurements may be many miles away.

Chris Vagasky is a meteorologist and research program manager at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.

THE CONVERSATION

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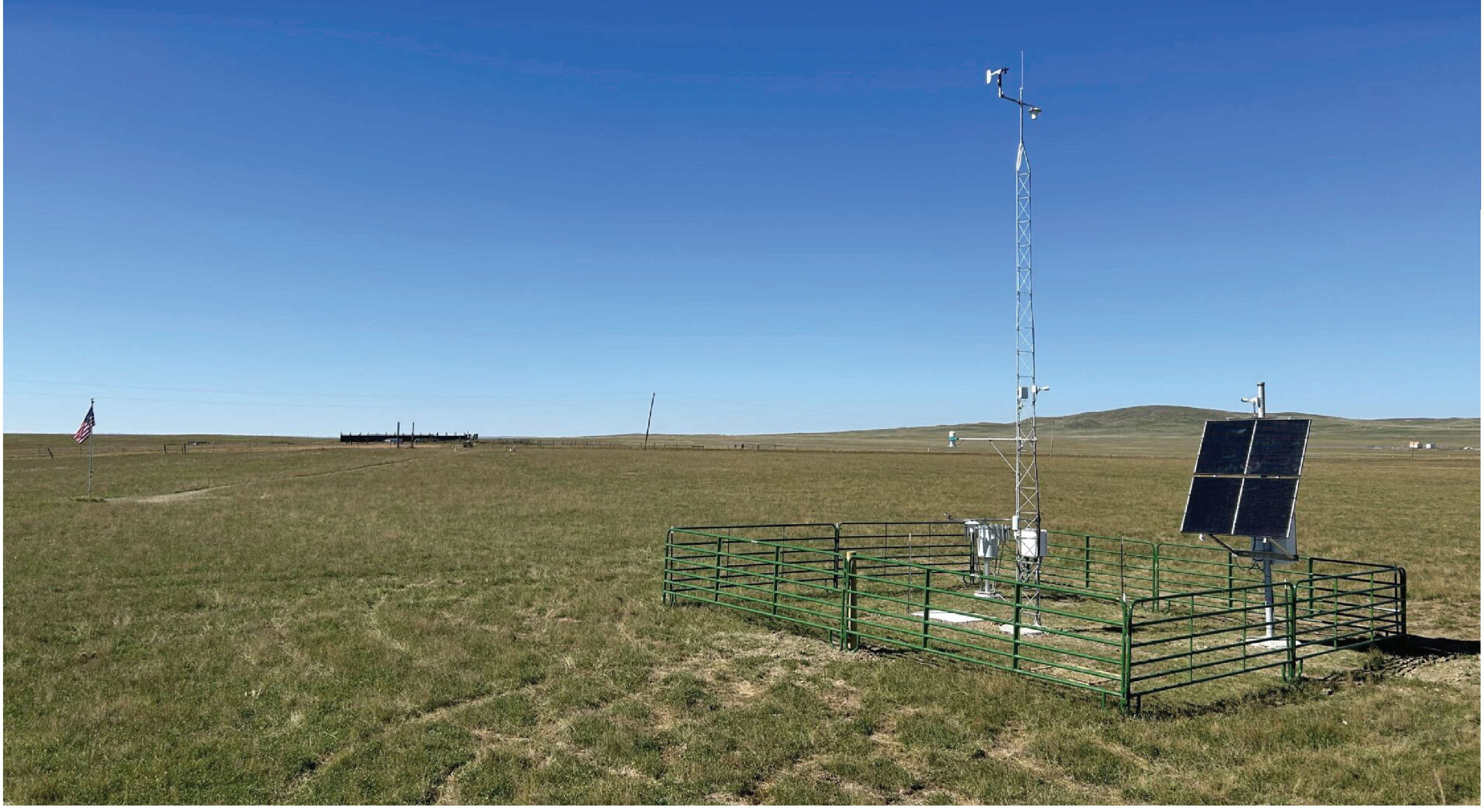
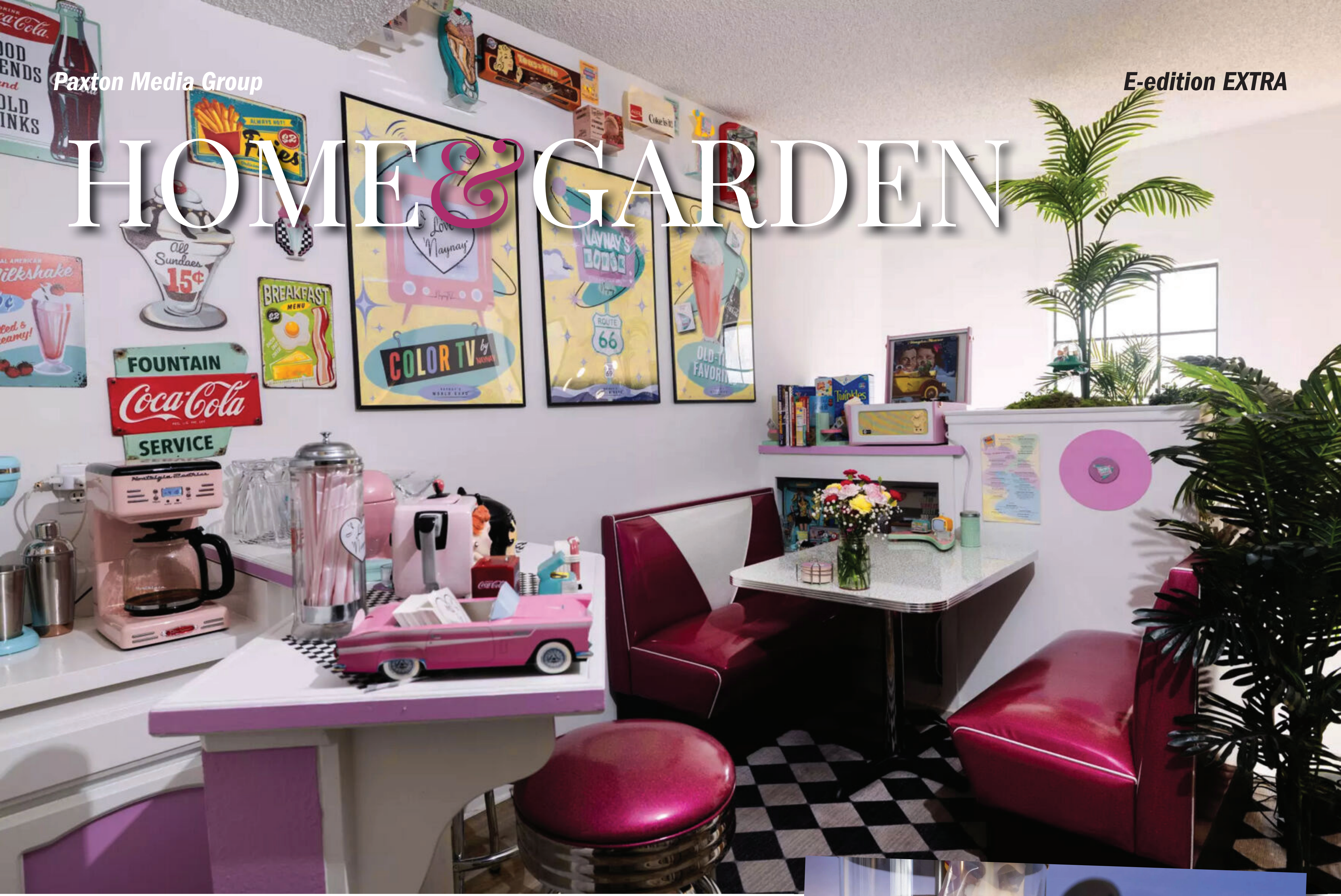


Matthew Sanders / South Dakota Mesonet / South Dakota State University via Wikimedia Commons

A South Dakota Mesonet weather station, 21 miles north of Belle Fourche, S.D.



His wild, theme park-style home in LA is full of joy

It even has a Disneyland room

TOP: Shahniani enjoys screening movies on the wall in his 1950s-style diner and serving TV dinners. **ABOVE:** A bedside lamp is filled with Disney ticket stubs next to a Mickey Mouse telephone.

Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times / TNS

By LISA BOONE
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Brandon Shahniani is obsessed with the 1980s sitcom "The Golden Girls," so much so that he decorated his breezy bedroom in pastel tones that would make Blanche Devereaux, the show's famously flirtatious character, green with envy.

"I want to live in 1980s Miami Beach," says the 28-year-old who's the co-owner of the Fair Oaks Pharmacy and Soda Fountain in South Pasadena, a Disney adult, and occasionally, the drag persona known as 'Naynay.

"When I ask myself, 'Where would I want to wake up?,' the answer is right here," he says. "And I sleep really well here."

His bedroom, which he calls 'Naynay's Expo Beach Resort, looks and feels like a hotel, with a soothing scent reminiscent of Coppertone sunscreen coming from a specialized scent-delivery machine, a resort activity schedule on the dresser and an emergency evacuation map on the back of the door.

Welcome to 'Naynay's World Expo, Shahniani's three-bedroom, three-bathroom 1982 townhome in Montrose, composed of 11 carefully curated immersive moments, each filled with the pop-culture sights, sounds and smells of his youth that make him "feel safe, expressed, playful and happy."

"Whimsy is very important to my generation," the zillennial says as he offers a tour. "The future is bleak for us," he adds, even though his upbeat attitude and warm energy make you feel like you've known him for years.

To push back against generational anxiety, Shahniani has covered every wall in his house with sentimental items – hundreds in total – many of them from periods he is too young to have experienced. There's a vintage Disneyland ticket book, a Rubik's Cube and an old aluminum speaker from a drive-in theater. Some things, including a signed birthday greeting from Disney Imagineer Joe Rohde, are framed. Others, including an Egg McMuffin carton, lunchboxes and food-themed Barbies, are simply mounted on the wall.

When you first walk in the front door, you'll see 'Naynay's Drag-In Dine-In Theater centered around a custom-made shiny red-and-white vinyl booth. Across from the booth and above the bar, a pink-and-white television made from an iPad inside a plastic foam cooler plays old cereal commercials and clips from "I Love Lucy" and "Bewitched" on repeat.

"I love a diner and a drive-in theater," he says about his movie nights, where he screens films and serves TV dinners. But don't expect him to sit still for long. "I'm not a big movie person," he says. "I play movies for ambience."

His home is visually overwhelming – as colorful, whimsical and jam-packed as Disneyland's Enchanted Tiki Room (which he prefers over theme park rides such as Space Mountain) – with license plates and custom-made signs by artists Reimi Mosses and Dan Rocky as big as movie posters.

"It's clear that he, like me, was educated at theme parks," says friend Charles Phoenix, a midcentury pop-culture and design expert. His home "feels like we are in some sort of exquisite divine design reality. It touches a nerve in me that everybody has their own version of nostalgia. And what Brandon has created is his own nostalgia."

Using sensory theme park tricks he picked up during his time as a storyteller at Disneyland, Shahniani, who grew up in South Pasadena, has filled his town house with sound effects from hidden speakers he controls with his iPhone. In the diner, for example, the speakers play outdoor sounds including crickets to create a real drive-in movie atmosphere. Upstairs in his bedroom, tropical sounds and steelpan music add to the feeling of sleeping in a seaside resort.

Other rooms downstairs include the B-Movie Bathroom, 'Naynay's Kitchen of Progress and the '80s & '90s Food Culture Hall of Fame dining room, which is illuminated by a Pizza Hut pendant. In the '80s Palm Common Room, a vintage keyboard, a computer mouse and touch-tone phone hang on the walls.

This spring, just outside the dining room, Shahniani will add the Expoterrace, a relaxing patio with a fountain, waterfalls and lush plants inspired by Living with the Land at Epcot in Florida.

Upstairs, in the bubble gum-pink Powder Room, Shahniani keeps his drag costumes, made by his favorite dressmaker, Kelsey Swarthout, who uses upcycled Disney sheets in her designs. He stores his makeup, wigs, earrings, eyelashes and purses in sleek cabinets and organizes them in a digital closet he built from an iPad and a plastic foam cooler.

When he's not getting ready as 'Naynay, he likes to watch "chick flicks" such as "Clueless," "Earth Girls are Easy" and "Pretty in Pink." Shahniani doesn't perform as a drag queen, but he enjoys dressing up as 'Naynay for different events and theme park visits. "I treat drag the way other people treat cosplay," he says.

Says Phoenix: "He's so original. I've never known anyone who self-presents like him."

Past the 1970s-themed mint chocolate chip bathroom, where you can lather up with Native Girl Scouts Cookies Thin Mint Body Wash, and through the Hall of 'Naynay, which displays seven retro portraits of Shahniani in his favorite drag outfits by illustrator Brittney Sides, you'll find the Disneyland-themed Archive Room. Shahniani calls it a "teenage boy's dream." Which tracks for someone who has visited every Disney theme park in the world – Tokyo is his favorite – and was recently featured in AJ Wolfe's book "Disney Adults: Exploring (And Falling in Love With) A Magical Subculture."

The Archive Room is painted blue and filled with Disney parks memorabilia he's collected over the years including his ticket stubs, which are safely stored in a fillable glass lamp. "From scouring through antique malls and online auctions to personal items from my childhood at the parks or things gifted by previous cast members and Imagineers, it's a holy grail collection of all of my personal hyperfixations from the park," he says.

Shahniani says his home feels special because so many friends helped with the design, the art on the walls and even his clothing.

His friend, theme park journalist Carlye Wisel, noticed these details too. "Visiting Brandon is glee-inducing not just because of the decor, but also the company," she says in an email. "At our annual holiday party, he sets up gingerbread houses for us to decorate, puts presents on the steps, and even bakes enough of his signature cookies that we can bring a box home to our families. Spending time at Brandon's house during the holidays is the closest I'll ever feel to being inside a Christmas movie."

Shahniani agrees: "It's so fun to be here. There's something so youthful about it."

The feeling of being transported by youthful energy motivates Shahniani every morning when he starts his day by playing Pinar Toprak's uplifting Epcot theme on the speakers downstairs.

As he puts it, "I believe that my default way of thinking, feeling and seeing the world is being dictated by the way I was programmed as a young child. When the youngest, most innocent version of you is healed and well, then it's easy to go out and do amazing things. And when little Brandon feels great inside, then big Brandon can go out and change the world for the better."

Now he hopes to help others build the dream life they've always imagined. "I'm currently working on an accessible life-coaching resource in the style of an '80s TV show, using YouTube videos, to show others they can defy the societal norm of being miserable," he says. "It'll be funny, effective, kitschy, nostalgic and change the way we use self-help for the better."

Some people may see it as whimsy, he says, adding: "Others call it prioritizing your mental health."

ABOVE: A Pizza Hut pendant illuminates McDonald's collectibles in the '80s & '90s Food Culture Hall of Fame dining room. **LEFT:** The guest bedroom is Disney-themed.

TRAVEL

Set in Sedon's Boynton Canyon, Mii amo is built for people who don't just want a massage but rather a container to actually come down a few notches. The resort of fully all-inclusive for Journeys, which run three, four, seven, or ten nights.

Maria Feklistova / Dreamstime / TNS

9 places to travel for a nervous system reset

By LESLIE K. HUGHES
TravelPulse (TNS)

As a traveler, you've probably experienced the feeling of coming back from a vacation more exhausted than when you left. The red-eye flights, the rushed connections, the overpacked itineraries and the squeezing in just one more dinner reservation. By the time you arrive at home, your body still thinks it's in survival mode. Your vacation was well-intentioned. But your nervous system never actually got a chance to exhale.

A growing number of retreats and resorts are approaching travel differently. Instead of giving you a busier version of your everyday life in a new location, they're building experiences specifically to help your nervous system calm down, via sleep programs, somatic practices, nature immersion, and a slower pace.

Here are nine escapes where your overextended self might finally feel safe enough to rest.

Destination New South Wales, Australia

New South Wales is essentially a nervous-system reset in map form.

In the Blue Mountains, the state's only authentic Japanese onsen tucks into the hills, with mineral-rich hot pools steaming in cool mountain air. Guests move between indoor and outdoor baths, lingering over tea or views instead of rushing to the next activity.

Forest bathing is part of the culture here, not just a trend. Guided shinrin-yoku walks are all about moving slowly, noticing the feel of bark under your hands, the sound of wind through the trees, the way your breathing naturally deepens when your phone stays in your pocket.

In Byron Bay, a five-day Power Within retreat in the hinterland focuses on nervous system regulation with breathwork, bioenergetics, yin yoga, and unhurried, nourishing meals.

Up in Port Stephens, Wildlight Experiences leads small groups on mindful coastal walks and low-key adventures. Think: bare feet, salt air, and simple rituals that bring you back into your body instead of chasing an adrenaline spike.

RAKxa Integrative Wellness, Thailand

Just outside bustling Bangkok, RAKxa feels like a self-contained wellness bubble. Villas sit among lagoons and gardens, and the energy is more more of quiet reset than a spa day add-on.

RAKxa's sleep-focused programs are built for people who can't remember the last time they woke up actually rested. Stays usually start with assessments – labs, lifestyle, sometimes genetics – so the team can see what's driving your fatigue.

From there, they layer in targeted bodywork, vibrational therapies, breathwork, and herbal compresses aimed at calming an overactive nervous system rather than just treating symptoms.

Traditional Chinese Medicine and Thai Medicine practitioners talk about circadian rhythms, herbs, and daily habits in a way that feels grounded and practical. In between sessions, you're eating healthy food that's designed to be both enjoyable and genuinely supportive, not just "spa-healthy."

It's the kind of place where you can literally see your progress in the data and feel it at night when your brain finally quiets down.

Nobu Ryokan Malibu, California

Nobu Ryokan Malibu is the kind of place that already feels soothing on arrival: low-slung buildings, natural materials, and the Pacific Ocean rolling just beyond your room. For a certain kind of traveler, though, the real hook is the partnership with CURE Wellness and its brain and nervous system retreats.

This is where you go when you want more than a massage and a mindfulness app. Guests can do quantitative EEG brain mapping to find out where their brain is stuck in "on" mode, then use neurofeedback sessions to nudge it toward calmer, more regulated patterns.

A typical day might include an IV drip tailored for nervous system support, a PEMF session, and a medical massage aimed at undoing years of tension.

There's also time built in for journaling and guided meditation so it doesn't just feel like a medical program, but a genuinely luxurious retreat with ocean air, thoughtful Japanese-inspired design, and Nobu breakfast on your balcony.

Mii amo, Arizona

Set in Sedona's Boynton Canyon, Mii amo is built for people who don't just want a massage but rather a container to actually come down a few notches. The resort of fully all-inclusive for Journeys, which run three, four, seven, or ten nights.

The idea is simple: you arrive with a reason (burnout, transition, grief, or just feeling maxed out) and work with a dedicated Journey Guide to shape your stay around what your nervous system actually needs right now. That might look like a mix of sound and light therapy, hands-on treatments that focus on circulation and lymph flow, slower movement classes, and time in the crystal grotto rituals that bookend each day.

Newer offerings like the Living in a Softer Body (September 13-13, 2026) series add an explicit somatic lens, teaching guest to read the signals of a body that's been stuck in fight-or-flight and practice gentler ways of responding instead of powering through

The setting of the red rocks with hikes straight from the property, quiet outdoor spaces, and rooms designed more like calm casitas than hotel suites makes this place the ideal location to regulate.

Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, Vancouver Island

Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge sits in a remote inlet on Vancouver Island, reachable only be seaplane or boat. Just getting there forces a slowdown. You're flying over water and wilderness, watching bars of cell service disappear one by one.

Once you arrive, the vibe is like a luxury summer camp for adults with an emphasis on nature as medicine. Safari-style tents face forest or water, and mornings might start with yoga followed by a long, relaxed breakfast. From there, you can choose your own level of activity: hiking through old-growth forest, paddling calm inlets, or just sitting on a deck listening to the river.

For a sharper reset, you can try a glacial plunge before warming up in the Healing Grounds Spa.

There's plenty to do here, but no expectation that you'll cram in everything. The point is to be somewhere quiet and beautiful enough that your nervous system finally believes it's safe to stand down.

Songtsam Lodges and Hotels, Tibet and Yunnan

Songtsam's collection of lodges in Tibet and Yunnan approaches wellness through traditional Tibetan medicine, which often talks about wind in the body – an imbalance associated with anxiety, restlessness, and poor sleep. Instead of offering a menu of disconnected treatments, the brand leans into a more holistic, time-tested way of calming that internal wind.

Guests might end the day with a singing bowl session, where sound and vibration do the heavy lifting while you lie still and let your mind settle. Therapies like Hor Me use warm, aromatic compresses placed on specific points to soothe the nervous system through touch and scent.

Time is intentionally unhurried. You walk mountain paths, visit monasteries, sip herbal teas, and look out over high-altitude landscapes that make daily worries feel smaller. The nervous system work here is quiet and cumulative. It builds over days of consistent, gentle input rather than one big "wow" moment.

Verdura Resort, Sicily

On Siciliy's southwest coast, Verdura Resort stretches across olive groves, citrus fields, and a private strip of Mediterranean beachfront. It's the kind of place where just looking out at the sea with an espresso in hand feels like a reset.

Verdura's newer longevity programs take that relaxed Mediterranean lifestyle and add a more structured wellness layer. Guests can opt into diagnostics like blood panels, food sensitivity tests, and Wellness Age evaluations to get a clearer picture of how stress is playing out in the body.

From there, the focus shifts to simple, sustainable changes: treatments using regional ingredients and days that prioritize walking, swimming, and rest over rushing. There's still plenty of dolce vita, but with a subtle throughline of "how do you want to feel ten years from now?" rather than "how much can you fit into three days?"

Baptiste Excelsia, Thailand

Baptiste Excelsia's retreats in Thailand are small by design. Just a handful of guests at a time enjoy this experience centered around rescued elephants and jungle surroundings. It's aimed at people who are overstimulated by schedules and noise and want to see what happens when the only agenda is to show up.

Much of the experience here is slow time with the elephants: walking alongside them as they move through the forest, watching them bathe, noticing your own breathing syn with their pace.

The rest of the day tends to be equally simple: meals, rest, maybe a swim or some journaling. There's no pressure to optimize your stay.

For nervous systems that have been in performance mode for years, that combination of gentle animal presence, nature, and very few decisions can be surprisingly profound.

Norrøna Adventure, Norway

Norrøna's Canvas Telemark experience in Norway is for travelers who find their calm in wild places and don't mind a bit of roughing it to get there. Think: off-grid yurts or cabins, wood-fired hot tubs, starry skies, and cold, clear water at your doorstep.

Days usually involve low-key movement like hiking through the forest, paddling along a fjord, or exploring rocky coastline at a pace that lets you actually take in where you are

Evenings are about simple pleasures such as soaking in a hot tub, sharing meals, watching the light shift, and turning in early because the dark and quiet make it easy.

Cold water dips are part of the culture here and after the initial shock, many people report a deep sense of calm and clarity that lingers for hours.

It's not polished in the way five-star spa is, but if your nervous system responds well to fresh air, weather, and elemental experiences, this can of trip can be incredibly regulating.

TRAVEL TIPS

Mario Tama / Getty Images / TNS

A street performer flips for the crowd on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter on May 15, 2009, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Vacations you can book with your tax refund

By NOREEN KOMPANIK
TravelPulse (TNS)

For those who are getting back more of a tax refund this year than anticipated, it might be nice to celebrate the occasion with a last-minute vacation. While some destinations may require more advance planning to nab good reservations, there are many other options available where last-minute bookings may even prove more affordable.

The key here is flexibility —on destination, dates, and vibe. It might also be a great idea to have several options in mind depending on if you're looking for easy access, value or cool places in case your top pick doesn't work out. And before booking, don't forget to check the expiration date on your passport if you're looking at traveling international.

We've provided some of the easiest destinations to quickly book with solid availability due to the number of resorts and price ranges/packages these places offer vacationers.

Dominican Republic (Punta Cana)

Punta Cana is built for easy, spontaneous travel. The region has dozens of large resorts in both Punta Cana and Cap Cana (the more polished, peaceful side of Punta Cana). Resorts often compete for last-minute discounts and most offer all-inclusive packages that include accommodations, meals, drinks and activities.

Direct flights from many U.S. cities along with airlines adding extra routes during peak seasons increases the odds of finding a decent fare, even last minute. Weather also plays a part of deciding to vacation here as April through June offers sunny and warm, but not the high humidity or the risk of a hurricane if traveling later in the year.

Mexico (Cancun/Riviera Maya)

Cancun and Riviera Maya are two of the easiest places to pull-off a great last-minute vacation. There are dozens of daily non-stop flights from both large and mid-size airports, typically with very competitive air pricing.

Vacationers can choose between the party vibe of Cancun with its numerous high-rise resorts or the more spread-out, laid-back luxury venues of Riviera Maya. Because these regions offer so much inventory, hotels and resorts will often have last-minute discounted rooms. Package deals which include flights plus hotel also provide additional savings. And if you're looking for an all-inclusive, this area has a ton of options available.

Bahamas

One of those rare destinations that actually gets easier to book last minute instead of harder, the Bahamas checks a lot of boxes that make spontaneous travel rewarding. It's not only super close to many U.S. cities with one-hour flight from most of Florida, but many destinations offer direct flights, especially to Nassau and Freeport. The best part about the Bahamas as a getaway is that the islands offer a wide range of experiences from popular, touristy destinations like Nassau to more hidden gems like Bimini, Exuma and Eleuthera. Whatever your travel preference, you'll find it in the Bahamas.

Los Cabos

Another destination that's easy to get to with direct flights from many U.S. cities is Los Cabos in Baja, California, Mexico. Yes, it's often considered a party town, but depending on where you stay and what you do, it doesn't have to be.

The destination is an excellent last-minute vacation spot as it combines accessibility, stunning beaches and an impressive resort infrastructure with a huge selection of all-inclusive and boutique hotels, many offering last-minute deals or discounted packages.

The dramatic desert meets the ocean landscape provides many options for vacationers, especially those who love the water. Snorkeling, diving, kayaking and deep-sea fishing are popular. There are calm beaches and others that offer surfing opportunities, and sunset cruises are awe-inspiring. Dining varies from beach bars and casual dives to farm-to-table venues and oceanfront luxury settings. The phrase "there's something for everyone" carries a lot of meaning here.

New Orleans

The Big Easy as it's often called, is a great choice for a last-minute getaway because it delivers a full, memorable experience without requiring much planning. It's a place where once visitors choose their method of transportation and book their choice of accommodation, the rest can be figured out once you're settled in. With a wide range of hotels, from boutique to big chains, it's easy to nab a booking.

There is the never-ending energy of Bourbon Street and the French Quarter with its jazz bands, street performers, and festivals, along with incredible Cajun and Creole and Southern-inspired cuisine. But visitors will find also the culture of its museums, history and architecture, along with the quieter ambience of the picturesque Garden District.

Gulf Shores

If you're looking for a relaxed beachy getaway without the crowds or the high price tags for accommodations, Gulf Shores offers soft white sand and calm, warm Gulf waters. Travel logistics are simple, whether driving or flying in to Gulf Shores/Orange Beach Regional Airport (MOB) or Pensacola. Either way, once on the ground, it's an easy drive to the beach.

With its mix of condos, vacation rentals and beachfront hotels, vacationers have lots of choices depending on preference. Fresh Gulf seafood is everywhere – shrimp, oysters, and grouper practically served hook and net to table and in most cases, you don't even need a dining reservation.

Las Vegas

It may not be for everybody, but the truth is that Las Vegas is easy to get to with a myriad of flight options and accommodation choices from budget to high-end luxury given its thousands of rooms on the Strip and beyond. The good news is that you don't even have to be a gambler, as "Sin City" has a lot more going for it than just slot machines and gaming tables.

Entertainment abounds with its shows, concerts, magic acts and nightlife. Celebrity chef restaurants make dining a delight while casual eats and buffets are available options. If you're into nature, Red Rock Canyon less than 30 minutes away is perfect for its scenery and hiking. Hoover Dam is a 45-minute drive excursion and other nearby desert adventures include horseback riding, hot air ballooning, ATV, dune buy and 4X4 tours.

San Diego

America's Finest City as it's often called, is ideal for an anytime-of-year getaway due to its magnificent temperate weather, sunshine, beaches, culture and outdoor activities. Even if you book last minute, chances are the weather will cooperate and if visiting before summer, beaches won't be crowded and hotel prices are more reasonable.

San Diego International Airport offers direct flights from most U.S. cities with easy access from Los Angeles or even Phoenix by car. Accommodations are plentiful and include hotels, boutique inns, vacation rentals and beachfront resorts. Whether vacationers come for a short 2-to-3-day trip or a longer stay, it's not hard to find cultural and action-packed activities to fill your days.

Some include the world-famous San Diego Zoo, USS Midway Museum and Embarcadero, Balboa Park and the Gaslamp Quarter nightlife, not to mention the numerous charming beach towns dotting the Pacific coastline.

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10 unique global hotels that are perfect for stargazing

By JOHN METCALFE
The Mercury News (TNS)

The universe has a crazy-quilt explosion of stars to show us each night. But if you live in an urban area, light pollution obscures it with a glowing washout.

People who want to get away from the city and experience the heavens' natural splendor might consider a stargazing-friendly hotel. And there are quite a few intriguing ones around the world that cater to amateur astronomers, according to Afar Media.

In its guide to the " 19 Best Hotels in the World for Stargazing," the travel publication rounded up one-of-a-kind places offering star safaris from Africa to Scotland to remote islands. We're talking about experiences like "sleek design with starry nights under the Namibian desert sky" or "stargazing with monks in peaceful Himalayan villages." And a couple in the U.S. and India are quite affordable, costing below $200 a night. Here are 10 of these illuminating places.

1. Adero Scottsdale Resort, Autograph Collection (Arizona)
2. Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas (Maldives)
3. Americana Motor Hotel (Arizona)
4. &Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge (Namibia)
5. Astrostays (India)
6. Basecamp Samburu (Kenya)
7. Battlesteads (England)
8. Dark Sky Dome (Scotland)
9. Explora Atacama (Chile)
10. Hoshinoya Taketomi Island (Japan)

Source: afar.com/hotels/10-hotels-where-you-can-go-stargazing

Stars appear to rotate around Polaris, the north star (C, top), in this time exposure, Jan. 26, 2006, above a view of the 4-meter telescope dome at Kitt Peak National Observatory near Tucson, Arizona. The image is composed of 114 30-second exposures of the night sky combined to make the equivalent of a nearly one hour exposure in which the earth's rotation causes the stars to appear to move across the night sky. The orange glow on the horizon is from the city of Phoenix, 100 miles away.

Stan Honda / AFP / Getty Images / TNS